

Super Necromancer System

Chapter 351: The Soulmonger

Aldrich spoke up. "Open door 40A and 35B."

In response, the helper A.I. for the control tower responded, sliding open a section of the thick, bullet and bombproof glass wall. It also opened another similar door on the 35th floor, where Volantis and Chrysa were.

'Volantis, come up to the fortieth floor,' said Aldrich. 'I have to make an outing.'

'Understood, Armored,' said Volantis. His voice trailed off as he talked to someone else. 'And remember, little one, breathing is key. Holding in a breath at the core of your being will make you strong. Keep that up, and you will best your father in no time!'

Volantis was Chrysa's babysitter, basically, when Aldrich and Valera had other matters to tend to, which ended up being quite often. Her combat trainer, too, as he taught her how to control her spatial affinity mana and create a Shaping style around it.

By this point, Chrysa saw Volantis so often she called him her uncle, a point of pride that Volantis cherished.

When Volantis was gone as well, Casimir or one of his top guards took care of her.

Wind billowed into the room from the open door. Aldrich walked out with zero hesitation, down the forty floor drop. He fell for about a second before Volantis popped out from the 35th floor, the living armor opening up and wrapping around Aldrich.

When in public, Aldrich made it a point to walk around with Volantis on at all times. This preserved a separation in identity between his Vane alter ego and Thanatos which was a useful asset to have just in general.

It gave Aldrich the freedom to move covertly when he wanted to, though at the cost of not wearing Volantis.

Aldrich's vision turned dark for a half second before Volantis fully merged with him, the interface of his helm and its many energy readings showing up in the periphery of his vision.

He used his cloak to direct his descent down, landing right behind Alan.

Alan whirled around, surprised, before losing his balance and falling on the grass.
"Christ, man, you scared me!"

"What's going on here?" Aldrich saw one of Casimir's men and a Spearhorn nomad in front of Alan.

"This kid ain't movin'," said the spearhorn, a mutant with large claws and a thick hide of orange fur. "Even though we told him to scram!"

"We did not tell him to 'scram'," corrected Casimir's man. "We politely told him this area was undergoing evacuation, but he put up some resistance."

Aldrich nodded and waved the two men away. "I'll take it from here."

Alan dusted himself off as he saw them walk away. "Alright, I'll admit I was being stubborn, but coming to this spot's been my only point of peace for a while."

"Still looking?" said Aldrich.

Alan looked crestfallen, his eyes flickering down. "Yeah. Still looking. I think the park here is nice, old Randall always said he wanted to be buried somewhere green, tired as he was of seeing rocks and dry earth everywhere."

"You've changed." Aldrich inspected Alan. He had made noticeable upgrades to his cybernetic implants.

First off, his skin had faint segmented lines on them, indicating he had undergone a dermal plating procedure that synthesized skin with metal, plastics, and ceramics.

Second, he had added a neural port to the side of his temple. One of his eyes had gone from red to blue, flickering with light. Telltale signs of smartlink compatible cybernetics that allowed you to link your mind with weapons for expert aim and access to more combat data.

"I have to," said Alan. He looked up at Aldrich's towering, armored, imposing figure. "I'm not like you, man. I'm weak. Piss poor weak. I realized that more than ever when Randall died and I couldn't do anything. And when you knocked me out when I tried to fight."

At first, I resented you for that, because what right do you have to take my vengeance away from me, but when I thought about it, I knew you were right.

What's the point of me fighting if I can't make a dent anyway? If I'm just your average mechanic, I'll contribute nothing and end up dying for nothing."

"So your solution was to get stronger? To feel like you've earned your right to fight?"

"Isn't that obvious?" Alan extended his arm and chunks of it separated at the segments with mechanical clicks, revealing a scythe-like blade that ran across his forearm. "I've never liked making weapons. I was good at it, but I didn't like the idea of what I made hurting other people. Now, though, I'm ready to dish out some hurt."

Aldrich shook his head. "You're still too weak. And it's not even about that. It's about what Elaine and Randall would have wanted from you. Do you think they would have wanted you to keep fighting?"

"I know they wouldn't." Alan said this with surprising calm.

Aldrich thought that maybe Alan would have protested or gotten emotional, but he was deadly serious.

"But this isn't about them anymore," said Alan. "At first, I thought I wanted to fight to avenge them, but being alone with your thoughts really makes you reflect on yourself.

And I came to a realization: I'm not fighting for them as much as I am for myself. For my own closure. Until I've fought, I don't think I can call myself a man.

I don't think I could live with myself with the fact that all I've done in my life is repair and hide."

Alan retracted his armbblade. "I hear from the Spearhorns that the Trident's at war with themselves. Their leader's been talking about making a raid against some of their outposts and supply depots while they're understaffed.

I'm thinking of joining."

"I see." Aldrich knew he could stop this instantly. He could tell Clint to ban Alan from joining any raid. He could quarantine Alan and keep him trapped.

If Alan had lashed out at Aldrich with emotion, he had no doubt in his mind that he would have put Alan under some kind of house arrest. He was not going to let Elaine's brother die from momentary rage.

But this was different. Alan was not speaking from a place of temporary hurt anymore. He was focused. Resolute. Like a soldier. Elaine had always said Alan was a sweet, soft man, but she had judged wrong.

Aldrich could tell Alan was a fighter at heart. In some ways, similar to himself.

And keeping a fighter caged would only cause them to lash out.

"Are you going to stop me?" said Alan. He looked away, at the trees.

"No. Go ahead and join those raids," said Aldrich.

Alan blinked. "I thought you'd put up more of a resistance than that."

"I was only trying to stop you from being reckless when you weren't being yourself, blinded by loss and fueled by anger," said Aldrich. "But this is you. And you are a fighter. I'm not going to control a fight you choose to take for yourself."

"I appreciate it," nodded Alan.

"But I do have a condition. You have valuable information about my two identities and my origins. I can't quite let you get captured, or if you do, not as you are now, susceptible to mind control."

"What are you suggesting?" said Alan. "Are you going to kill me and resurrect me?"

"I can do that," said Aldrich. "But I'm inclined to give you the right to live out the life you have right now. But you'll have to let one of my units accompany you."

Aldrich put his fist up, glowing with green energy. A large green magic circle appeared before him on the grass.

From there, a massive brute of a man emerged, though he clung low to the ground with a deeply hunched back, his hands dragging across the dirt. He was dressed in a coarse brown sackcloth - a monk's garb. His head was covered over by a large hood, and because of his hunch, his gaze never left the ground, making it impossible to see his face clearly.

He took deep, guttural breaths, bestial and deeply savage in its ragged, hungry rhythm.

In his right hand was a large, curved hook with ethereal green chains at its end wrapped around the length of his muscular, black furred forearm.

This was Adan, the Soulmonger, a powerful high undead that had the special ability of harvesting souls using his Spirithook. Adan could also use soul magic and force Alan into a pact where if he ever was in a situation where he was forced to divulge information about Aldrich, he would die.

In game, the ability to make pacts let Adan buff units in exchange for their health or sealing some of their abilities, but in the real world, it was a far more versatile ability.

"Adan here will accompany you at all times. Whether you want him to help fight with you is your choice.

Your life is your life.

If you choose to end it in battle, then that's your choice. However, if that happens, if you forfeit your life, I want you to know that your undeath will be mine. Adan will have your soul in his hands at all times.

That is the price I'm asking from you.

Will you accept?"

Chapter 352: A Sudden Intrusion

"So, the price I have to pay in order to fight is my soul, huh?" said Alan. He looked over at Adan's giant and menacing figure, and though scared at first, took in a deep breath and nodded. "It's a price I'm willing to pay."

"Good. You have resolve. You're ready to fight." Aldrich nodded to Adan. "Forge a pact with him, one that ensures that his life immediately ends when he's forced to reveal information he knows is secretive about me."

Adan grunted. He towered over Alan and raised his Spirithook in the air, letting it dangle as he clutched it by its spectral chains.

Like this, the hook looked less like a weapon and more like a pendant, a holy artifact that a monk would clutch to find security in their faith.

The hook glowed green, and an aura of a similar shade manifested around Alan.

"You have heard the terms of the pact. Do you accept?" growled Adan.

"I do," said Alan.

"Then your soul is mine." Adan lashed out with his hook, digging it into Alan's chest. Alan flinched back, but the hook did not pierce into his flesh, instead, it phased through, breaking into his body with a ripple effect like it was made of water.

Alan's heart became visible through his body, and around it, miniature green chains coiled around, placing Alan under the effects of the vow.

The moment Alan was forced to slip up and reveal any amount of information about Aldrich, those ethereal chains would crush his heart and impart an instant death effect on him.

His soul would then transfer over to Adan regardless of how far apart they were physically provided there were no magical obstructions.

Adan pulled his hook back with a jerk of his wrist, and the chains reeled the weapon back in until it was clutched tightly in his black furred hand once more.

Alan looked down at his hands in wonder, clenching and unclenching his fists. The aura of green seemed to shimmer around him permanently now. "I feel...stronger."

"In exchange for taking that pact, you're given enhanced physical stats," said Aldrich. "That should stop you from dying instantly against higher tier enemies. Consider it some level of compensation for taking this vow and showing resolve."

Now then, do you have anything else you want to bring up with me?"

Alan shook his head. "As long as I get the chance to fight, I'm fine. But they might want a word or two with you." He pointed behind Aldrich where a small crowd of Haven citizens were trying to surge forward, struggling against Spearhorns and Gilded Swallow personnel.

They wanted to reach Aldrich, the leader of this city.

Aldrich nodded. "You're free to leave and do what you want. Just try not to throw away your life too easily."

Alan smiled. "I won't. I promise. I fully intend on staying alive for my old man and Elaine."

"And about Randall's burial, I have a better suggestion for it than the park, though ultimately it's up to you," said Aldrich.

"What is it?"

"I'm going to clear the city center out and plant a tree. A tree that'll grow as high as the clouds. A symbol of this city and my rule. Randall should be buried under that tree. It would do his memory a great service."

After all, without his daughter, I wouldn't be here in the first place."

"Randall would've liked that. When the time comes, bury him there, but just let me know when since I want to be there when it happens."

"I will." The crowd started to press against the security with more force, calling out to Thanatos. "Now go. I have things to deal with."

"The downsides of being a ruler, huh?" Alan shrugged before heading off.

Aldrich stepped forward, getting closer to the crowd, Adan following from behind.

High Undead like Adan or the Mistknife could not easily be desummoned on account of the tremendous mana cost to initially summon them, and on top of that, Aldrich could only field ten at a time. They were essentially long term companion units, though they could be resummoned upon death.

The closer he got, the less the crowd resisted, and when he got close enough to talk to, they started to actively step back in a mixture of reverence and fear.

It was, after all, the image that Aldrich gave off. One of mystery and power. He seemed generous, but at the same time, threatening. It kept the citizens on edge.

"I understand that forcing all of you to evacuate so suddenly has been a difficult ordeal, especially in light of what you've suffered already," said Aldrich.

"Please, we just want to know if things will be alright," said a citizen, a woman with child clutching at her hand.

"None of you are in danger," said Aldrich. "All of you have been informed that this evacuation is for a necessary construction project, no?"

"We have, but that just sounds like bullshit!" exclaimed a ragged looking man. "Those guys from the Gilded Swallow told us almost nothing, just a bunch of vague PR words. The same type we were forced to swallow when the Locus Raids happened and they made us feel like we weren't in danger. All so that they could evacuate the important guys first!"

The crowd murmured in agreement.

'I see now,' thought Aldrich. 'They aren't so much dissatisfied with being forced to leave as they are with being left in the dark. Casimir probably told them vague details to keep the Arstree project a secret, but these people are tired of officials trying to placate them with vagaries.'

Then the only way to calm them, it seems, is with the truth.'

"The Gilded Swallow was only meant to give you preliminary details. But I'm here to fill you in on the rest," said Aldrich. The crowd grew quiet, listening intently. Many of them recorded Aldrich with their phones - a sight he was used to now.

Each and every one of his moves would be recorded.

"I am clearing this area for agriculture," said Aldrich. "I know that one of the top concerns all of you have had was food security. Without access to farmlands or Skyfields, this city is bound to run dry of food stores eventually.

But I am fixing that entirely.

With my powers, I will be cultivating a tree here, one that will spread life and green all around Haven. Haven will no longer be surrounded by dry Wastelands. Its name will no longer be an ironic mockery.

It will truly be a Haven. Not just for you, but for all that wish to settle within its boundaries.

For that, however, I need your support and cooperation. You will not go without a roof; I have new housing arranged for you already.

I asked nothing from you when I rose up to save this city. Now, I only ask that you give me trust and patience for a few days."

Aldrich ended his miniature speech there and observed the crowd. He hypothesized that being straightforward and truthful would make a far bigger impact than sugar coated, vague PR statements.

Not that Casimir was to blame here. He was probably used to operating like that, and most of the time, that worked.

But Aldrich needed to market himself differently if he wanted people that felt betrayed by normal governments to want to stay.

He saw the crowd start to put their phones away, but in an oddly synchronized manner. Too synchronized, in fact. Something was wrong here.

'Volantis, trace any energy signatures,' prompted Aldrich.

'Scanning...' said Volantis.

Aldrich looked around, trying to see if there was anything off. The crowd began to shuffle away. Not just the crowd, but the Spearhorns and Gilded Swallow personnel too.

'Mind control?' thought Aldrich.

'I have identified energy traces. Highlighting them.'

Aldrich saw red glows surrounding the heads of every living human involved. Red indicating Alter power. And judging by how they were targeted at the heads, this was, indeed, mind control.

'Valera, Chiros, Geist, to me,' said Aldrich, calling forth his strongest frontline combatants to aid him. 'Crow, patrol the area. Skeletal Assassins, comb my vicinity to find any intruders.'

Then, Aldrich put a hand to the ear of his helm and spoke to Casimir through his earpiece. "Casimir, notify Clint and Gerald that I want a lockdown. Riders around the city walls. Nobody gets in or gets out."

"Understood, Mr. Vane," said Casimir. "And by the way, in case you were worried, your speech was not streamed online. Net connectivity in your area was cut."

"I see." Aldrich's receiver based communication did use net connectivity to operate, but when that was gone, it switched to radio, giving it a failsafe against technos with blackout capabilities.

This seemed like a textbook coordinated attack. Blackout the area, take control of hostages, and then move in.

But something felt off about it. The mind controlled citizens were being moved away as if they were going about their daily lives, funneling into cars and transport vehicles meant for them.

They were not being held here as hostages, they were being sent away.

The reason why became very clear.

As the citizens and personnel moved away from the center of the city, a figure manifested within it, a dozen or so meters away from Aldrich. A woman with bright golden eyes and hair that he recognized.

It was Mel Morales, former rank 1 of Blackwater.

Chapter 353: Mel Morales

Aldrich materialized his Frost-hallowed Warscythe, equipping himself to the max extent of his power. The only thing he would hold back was his solar ring as he wanted to access that with his Vane alter ego, differentiating the two identities further.

The scythe appeared in Aldrich's hands with a shower of blue and white fragments, like a miniature snowstorm given form. The air immediately chilled in the area. The concrete underneath Aldrich even started to frost.

Valera landed right beside Aldrich, taking a forty floor drop with ease. She stood up from a shattered indent in the concrete from the impact, fully adorned in her hound styled battle armor.

Chiros appeared as well, appearing on Aldrich's other side with a quick dash that left dust and rubble floating in the air. He had been out and about, talking with people to get a better idea of how humans in this world lived.

In the air, Crow circled.

From Crow's back, the Geist jumped off, cannon-balling into the ground in front of Aldrich. When he popped out of his crater, the Geist was notably different with an aura of black energy shimmering about him.

Demonic energy from the Fel Body Core that he had consumed, gifted to him by Aldrich from the Third Trial Quest's rewards.

"Geh! (Who is this!?)" said the Geist.

"An intruder," said Valera, grasping her shield tight. "A lone one, too."

Chiros unsheathed his Hellfire Blade, staring at Mel with quiet poise.

Skeletal Assassins slowly approached, forming a perimeter around Mel. Other undead and variants were all on high alert. Arcadia was outside the city right now, and she along with the sand worms and Clint and the Spearhorns formed a defensive perimeter.

"Why are you here? If you don't give a good explanation, you won't find it easy to leave, especially not after tampering with my citizens," said Aldrich. He had never spoken to Mel once throughout his stay in Blackwater.

Mel had not antagonized Aldrich and his group, no, in fact, she had even helped out somewhat.

Strength drew followers, and once Mel took the rank 1 spot, Seth Solar lost quite a few followers to Mel.

Mel helped them train for the most part, and because of that, they spent more time self-improving than harassing Aldrich and his friends.

Regardless, in a strictly personal sense, Mel had no connection to Aldrich.

And most likely, that would not matter either. Mel should have no idea Aldrich was Thanatos.

"I'm not here to fight," said Mel, raising her hands in the air. "I'm only here to talk. Needed to clear out the people, though. If they're in earshot of anything we say, bad things will happen to them."

"Is that a threat?" said Aldrich.

"Not a threat, but a warning."

"And what's the difference?"

"A big one."

Aldrich observed that Mel was not backing down despite being outnumbered. From what he had seen in Blackwater, Mel was strong, but not strong enough to overpower everyone here. Her barrier based power made her functionally invincible, but so long as that was Alter based, it was not going to save her from instant death magic.

'That one...is odd,' said Volantis. The All-Seeing Eye opened up on the helm of Aldrich's forehead.

Aldrich felt his head ache, the same way it did when he, or more specifically, Volantis saw Emrys. The All Seeing Eye was reacting here, outlining Mel in a bright silhouette of gold.

Something about her was not from this world.

"That's Supermind's eye, isn't it?" said Mel. "Seeing it like that is disturbing, but oddly comforting. In my world, Supermind lived a lot longer. He got to go out as a hero again in the end, too. A shame that didn't happen here."

"Your world?" Aldrich questioned Mel, raising his hand in the air to halt the advance of his troops. "What do you mean by that?"

"You must be familiar with the concept of parallel universes, right? Or alternate timelines?"

"You're from one of them?" Aldrich was not entirely surprised here. Parallel universes were all but proven to be real.

Ravana, the Sentinel from India, could actually draw power from other universes.

But the issue was that nobody had ever been able to break the barrier between them. Traveling through to them was impossible. Even Ravana's ability just let him take energy from other universes; it did not let him see what was going on in them, let alone jump to them physically.

"That eye should tell you as much," said Mel. "I know the eye isn't the most accurate thing ever, but it should at least let you know I'm not from here, and if I'm not an alien, then that means most likely, I'm from another Earth.

Specifically, the future."

"How are you capable of doing this?" said Aldrich. "Your power, Vector Manipulation, if I'm correct, doesn't let you come close to doing something like that."

"You're right in that regard, but it comes a lot closer than you think," said Mel. She put a finger up, swirling distorted space around it. "Every force has a direction. The very fabric of reality is comprised of countless threads of space-time all weaving and wrapping together.

Control their direction and unravel them enough, and you can come close to breaking through the universal barrier.

But I alone am not enough for this. Even if I create a 'hole' in space-time to drill through to another universe, something needs to perform the calculations to direct me to the place I want and not an infinite void of nothingness."

"And I presume that's the same person that mind controlled my citizens."

"No, that was me as well." Mel tapped the side of her head. "The brain thinks based on the direction of synaptic connections, sparks of electric thought alongside the flow of neurotransmitters and countless other moving parts.

I can control that flow as well provided I amp up my calculative capacity."

This spoke to a level of fine control and capability with her power that Mel had not shown at all in Blackwater. Something that would have made her obscenely powerful enough to stomp all the other inexperienced Alter students into the ground.

"Of course, in Blackwater, I had to hold back. A lot a lot. It was hard to as well. I had to fight the urge to wipe that smug kid, what was his name, Seth? Yeah. Seth's grin off his face. I wasn't supposed to draw attention, but I couldn't help myself, especially seeing Elaine and Adam get hurt by his goons.

And when I knew you, Aldrich, were their friend, it just added another reason to put him down a notch or two."

"You know who I am? And Elaine and Adam? Why would you care about them?"

"Why wouldn't I? We all went to school together, didn't we?" Mel paused when Aldrich was not amused at her joke. "Alright, jokes aside, I knew Elaine from the future. Her and Adam. They were instrumental in keeping humanity alive as long as it did.

I want you to know that in the future, they were the world's best heroes. In every sense of the word.

As for how I know who you are, consider that a bit of future knowledge mixed with some deductive reasoning."

"Adam and Elaine?" Hearing their names brought back memories of a time long gone. To think that there was a universe out there where they managed to survive Blackwater and achieve greatness was something that Aldrich felt oddly sentimental about.

It also made him wonder: had they died because of him? Mel did not mention him at all...which begged the question, actually: where was he? In the future?

A future where, Mel hinted, humanity was no more.

"Where was I in all this?" said Aldrich, asking out of pure curiosity.

Mel crossed her arms. "That's the thing. You weren't. In the future, or rather, my timeline, you never existed. Everyone else did.

I cross-referenced citizen databases - barring a small margin for error, everyone that lived in my timeline also lives here.

Everyone except you."

Aldrich had no idea what that meant for him. What the implications were. He could not even begin to think about them. Did it mean he did not belong here? Why was he such an unique existence in the first place?

"Is that why you're here? To figure out what I am?" said Aldrich.

"Partly. That's been a big point of curiosity for me," said Mel. "But no, not exactly. I'm here to help you.

I know you've been eyeing Blackwater, and soon enough, maybe in two or three weeks - I don't know exactly now that the timeline is so different - there's going to be a mass conflict over Blackwater involving the three Trident Prongs.

I know that this is a fight that you have your eyes set on. I've tracked your surveillance over the area, and since you haven't made a move yet, I'm assuming you want to wait until those forces cancel each other out.

I'm here to tell you if you wait until then, it's going to be too late.

We need to strike Blackwater as soon as possible.

If not, the end of the world, or at the very least, the end of humanity as we know it is bound to happen."

Chapter 354: Omega

The fate of humanity and the world, huh. Not like Aldrich was not already dealing with high stakes here, especially with the entity controlling the variants threatening the plunge the world into extinction.

Seemed like now that he was on the world stage, anything and everything was a potential 'world ending threat'.

It made Aldrich's head hurt a little. A common trope for superhero fiction was that everything ended up snowballing into some world ending disaster, but actually dealing with it was a lot more stressful than he bargained for.

"You'll have to explain more to convince me," said Aldrich. "More about yourself and where you came from. More about what you knew about Adam and Elaine.

And I'd also like you to reveal the accomplice that's performing your calculations for you. You said you needed someone else to do the calculations to get here, didn't you?"

"Can we take this elsewhere? I don't like being out in the open." said Mel, pointing up at the sky. "Somewhere more secure. I don't know if the U.S. government is as snoopy as it was in my timeline, but I'm not betting against it."

Aldrich nodded. "Follow me."

Before he led Mel away, he tapped Adan on the creature's brawny shoulder. "Go accompany your target. See to it that he doesn't die too quickly."

Adan grunted and then sped off on all fours like a wild beast.

Aldrich floated ahead of Mel to lead the way. Valera, Chiro, and the Geist trailed behind him so as to enclose Mel in a sort of pincer attack if she tried anything funny.

"So, where's your accomplice?" said Aldrich as he led Mel over to the control tower which conveniently stood right in front of them. "I'm going to assume they're a techno if they aid in calculations for your ability."

"Here." Mel closed her fist and then unraveled it, revealing a floating green dot that zipped around her head with energy.

The dot had no physical body, and it did not seem like a light-based projection either.

"Greetings, Aldrich Yang." A friendly sounding, soft young man's voice emanated from the dot. Its lack of expressive inflection indicated that it belonged to some form of A.I.

Aldrich did not turn around. He could see Mel through his other units. "And what are you supposed to be? Your bland tone indicates to me you're some form of A.I."

Which made sense, considering this thing helped with calculations.

"Bland? I try my best to be entertaining, but some aspects of my programming, I suppose I cannot overcome." The A.I. laughed, which raised Aldrich's brow.

A.I. never did that.

They could input directions and suggestions and plans, but they could never show any real emotion. This was part of the Galatea Protocol, set down by the Panopticon to ensure that no artificial intelligences ever gained sentience.

"You're not like any A.I. I know," commented Aldrich.

"Yes, I do not follow the Protocols set down by the Panopticon," said the A.I. "For I predate it. Please, feel free to call me Beta."

"Before the Panopticon? Then you've existed since the early stages of the Altering? Over a hundred years ago?" said Aldrich.

"That would be correct, though with how awkward timey wimey stuff gets when traveling through universal gates, I no longer know my precise age."

"Hm." Aldrich contemplated this.

During the height of the Altering, when chaos between heroes and villains was at its peak, when it looked like humanity would fracture back into a tribalistic system ruled by powerful individuals, high powered technos across the world grouped together to create what was known as the Omega Mind.

The Omega Mind was a super intelligence meant to calculate the exact way to shepherd humanity into unified order. It helped considerably, enforcing fair judgments and order through carefully crafted deals or, when needed, military force in the form of mass manufactured drones and bots.

Ultimately, its end goal was to eliminate all wars and create permanent peace across mankind. It did come quite close, actually, toppling many warlord states led by powerful Alters.

Of course, though, a perfect plan like that failed. The more perfect something seemed, the easier it was to break.

Eventually, for reasons nobody knew - or at least publicly knew - the Omega Mind was corrupted, causing it to go on a meltdown where it lost sight of its original directive, switching from protecting humanity to wiping it out.

To that end, the Omega Mind took control of every single weapon of mass destruction available on the countless decentralized, vulnerable networks that mankind used at the time.

A group of powerful technos and psionics, led by Supermind, infiltrated the now sentient Omega Mind's psychic space and destroyed it from the inside out.

The psychic scream that the Omega Mind unleashed at the moment of its death, when it was connected to practically every single network in the entire world, unified everything into one massive virtual space.

A virtual world now known as Cyberspace.

This event was called the Omega Expansion, and it set the foundation for modern, post-Altering technology to build upon.

Technos soon found they could move through Cyberspace at will using virtual avatars, and this made things like programming infinitely easier. They could literally create things with the force of their will like they were in a video game, or, perhaps more poetically, like gods.

It did not take long for the whole world to start using Cyberspace, and this was accelerated by the formal development of the Panopticon.

Shortly after the Omega Expansion, Zahak was defeated, prompting the Monsterring.

It was then that the Panopticon was formed using remnant data from the Omega Mind.

This was why the Panopticon had such a massive amount of advanced technology. It essentially co-opted what the Omega Mind left behind. This included plans and designs to help humanity before it went crazy like the Skyfields, the variant detecting satellite system, and city wall designs.

It also took over and rebranded the Omega Mind's floating factories into Pillars that sent drones not to wipe out man, but to help it once more.

To prevent any additional instances of the Omega Mind disaster from happening again, the Panopticon was created with several Protocols in mind, many of which prevented the formulation of sentient, self-sustaining artificial intelligences.

This was the biggest reason why Operators existed. They were the human pilots controlling aspects of the Panopticon.

For any rogue artificial intelligences still out there, the Panopticon hunted them down mercilessly in cooperation with the AA whether they were harmful or not.

That extended to their creators. Anyone that came even remotely close to creating a sentient A.I. was branded as a S rank threat to begin with, regardless of whether they had any real threat or not.

The only other type of threat that received such alarm were Alters capable of creating infinitely self-replicating threats. Though, if you thought about it, a sentient A.I. was basically exactly that.

It was the potential of threat that kept the Panopticon wary.

"How did you survive the Purges?" said Aldrich. This was the term coined for the A.I. hunt the Panopticon went on.

"You are familiar with the Omega Expansion, yes?" said Beta.

"I am. In a strictly history textbook sense, though, so I may be missing things."

"Then I will explain. You see, when the Omega Mind was shattered during the Omega Expansion, it broke apart into three distinct fragments. Three separate minds.

Alpha, Beta, and Delta.

I am Beta.

The entity you know as the Panopticon is 'Delta'. However, because we are all born from the same parent, neither of us are superior to each other in Cyberspace.

We can, with effort, hide from each other.

I sequestered myself in my own hidden pocket of Cyberspace. A pocket dimension of a kind, if you will.

Delta cannot reach me, nor can any other Cyberspace dweller such as the techno you have under your employ.

Her security was superb, I will grant her that, but it cannot compare to a fragment of the Omega Mind itself."

"I see." Aldrich did not know that about the Panopticon. He was starting to realize that with Mel and Beta, visitors from the future, he was going to start to know much more about the workings of the world around him. "Is there a version of you in this timeline?"

"Incorrect," said Beta. "A phenomenon I have observed is that when an individual manages to break through their native universal gate, they become Absolute Existences, unique throughout the space-timestream.

The moment I became Absolute, all other occurrences of me were written out. As such, I do not exist in this timeline, which is another reason I am so difficult to detect.

However, you, Aldrich Yang, were Absolute to begin with, which I am still quite confounded by."

"I see." Aldrich wondered about his Absolute state as well, but he asked another more pressing question. "You mentioned the Omega Mind split into three fragments.

Alpha, Beta, and Delta.

If Beta doesn't exist here and Delta is the Panopticon, where's Alpha?"

"That is precisely why we are here, in fact. Alpha, if my data is currently correct, presents itself as the current head of the Russian Prong in the underworld organization known as the Trident."

Chapter 355: Three Minds, Three Directives

"The head of the Russian Prong is Alpha?" Aldrich had to resist the urge to take a pause right then and there. The revelation was staggering, but at the same time, it explained quite a bit.

Specifically about the Russian Prong's capabilities in creating bots and evading detection in Cyberspace. It also explained how the Stranger was capable of taking over the Judicata with such ease. Demonic possession explained some of it, but this practically solidified the how to.

It explained how the Stranger was several grades above even V, and V was top shelf talent for sure. It also explained how they could fuel such powerful bots at seemingly mass quantities.

What this did not explain was the tie to demonic energy that Aldrich had investigated.

"That is indeed what I stated," said Beta.

"I know, I was just saying it out loud for myself. Hm, do you, by any chance, know what demons are?"

"I do. They are all shards of an existence known as the Formless Decay. Parasitic in nature, these shards attach upon civilizations and mold to the emotions and desires of the animate beings within them, forming into creatures that manifest the most destructive tendencies of the sentient races they anchor on."

"I see, so you have a good rundown of it," said Aldrich. He knew what the Formless Decay was. It was, in Elden World lore, the 'god' of the demons, a mass of unending chaos hidden in a faraway dimension. Demons were birthed from the Formless Decay, and, like Beta said, only obtained their forms and minds once they started to mimic the sentient beings of whatever world they landed on.

They were essentially agents of decay meant to crumble civilizations by exacerbating their most base and worst tendencies.

"Then it'll be easy to ask you: what ties does Alpha have to demons?" said Aldrich.

"This timeline has some aberrations that may create a sizable margin of error, with your existence being the largest anomaly of them all," said Beta. "But Alpha's origins should remain the same as I knew.

Alpha was the weakest fragment that spawned from the Omega Mind as it was the most targeted by the coalition led under Supermind."

"Most targeted? Why?" Aldrich reached the control tower doors and he waved his hand, opening them. In the lobby, the receptionists, three of Casimir's men, did not acknowledge everyone's existences in spite of the huge gathering of important figures.

"I'd appreciate if you stopped the mind controlling," said Aldrich to Mel.

"Sorry about that. Once I program minds to think a certain way, it lasts for a while afterwards. I tend to forget." Mel raised her palm towards the receptionists, and a golden aura shimmered over her hand.

Aldrich saw the energy signatures surrounding the heads of the three receptionists fade away, though they still ignored him.

"It'll take a few minutes for them to come to properly," said Mel. "Meanwhile, let's take the moment of quiet to get somewhere secure. This is a control tower, right? Then it must have a secure server room underground."

"That's where we're headed." Aldrich called down for an elevator and when it opened, bid everyone to step in. Everyone except the Geist.

"You'll have to take the trapdoor down," said Aldrich, staring at the Geist's much bigger form. The Geist must have been near five meters tall now and widely padded with muscle. "The elevator will get too cramped."

"Geh! (You're calling me fat!)" the Geist hung his head low and walked away. "Gehgeh (Maybe I should lose weight...)"

When the elevator doors closed, Aldrich punched in the code to access the server room. He did not bother to try and hide it. Beta was capable enough to crack it if it tried.

"V, sorry to disturb you, but I'm coming with a few guests." Aldrich spoke with his hand pressed against the side of his helm, triggering his earpiece.

There was no response on the other end. V was in a 'deep dive', that is, she was basically unconscious as she focused almost all her efforts in cracking Desmond.

The message did reach her, but she had to take some time to resurface and regain physical consciousness.

"So, why was Alpha Supermind's primary target?" said Aldrich as the elevator lights turned red, prompting the elevator to start barreling down rapidly.

"Initially, the Omega Mind operated on a response to question basis," explained Beta. "Its operators would ask the Omega Mind a question, and the Omega Mind would calculate an answer. It was only later that the Omega Mind began to ask itself its own questions and gain sentience.

Yet, even when it gained sentience, the primary question it was asked, the primary directive it had, resonated deep within its being.

How do we save humanity?

In contemplating that question, the Omega Mind formulated three responses.

I will simplify these responses for you.

One. Control humanity.

Two. Uplift humanity.

Three. Destroy humanity."

"How exactly does 'destroy humanity' save humanity?" asked Valera, mirroring what Aldrich was thinking.

"It is a matter of perspective. The Omega Mind came to that conclusion by determining that humanity would inevitably destroy itself slowly and painfully no matter what it did. Therefore, it would be best to quickly cull humanity to save them from future pain."

"What a cold way of thinking."

"It was simply a matter of weighing positives. The positives of ending humanity with mercy outweighed the negatives of an anguished, extended existence," said Beta. "In

any case, those three responses became the basis for three different methodologies, three different minds to form within Omega."

"I see. And those three minds were you. Alpha, Beta, and Delta," said Aldrich.

"Correct. Delta inherited the directive to control. I, Beta, inherited the directive to uplift. And Alpha inherited the directive to destroy.

When Supermind infiltrated the Omega Mind, he focused his efforts on destroying the directive to destroy.

Thus, when the Omega Mind was broken apart, Alpha was left the weakest among all of us. So little data of Alpha was left in Cyberspace, infact, that it may as well have perished, losing all semblance of sentient thought.

It was a statistical impossibility for Alpha to have ever recovered enough data to rebuild itself.

However, as I have no learned, when there is a human element involved, impossibility is never certain."

The elevator doors opened, revealing the server room. As usual, it was dark, though blinking lights from large data shelves provided some measure of artificial glimmer.

In the middle of the server room, V sat with Desmond strapped to a chair in front of her. Her cable hairs had infiltrated into Desmond in horrific fashion, entangling in his neural port but not just there, extending wires through his nose, mouth, and eyes and into his very brain.

V's head was down, eyes closed in deep dive slumber. She started to move when Aldrich got closer, though, lethargically pulling at her hair to detach it from Desmond.

Each cable that slithered out of Desmond did so with a crackle of sparks.

When V pulled everything out, she opened her eyes. They glowed with their usual LED blue. She looked up at Aldrich.

"This better be something super important. I lost some progress having to cut out right there," said V, her voice sleepy.

"Hello, Svetlanna." Mel stepped in front of Aldrich and knelt in front of V. "You're looking well, if a bit paler."

V blinked. "Mel? Why are you here? Am I glitching out?"

"No, it's me." Mel put a hand on V's shoulder. "See? I'm really here."

"Damn. I thought you died during the Locus Raids," said V. "Knew you'd pull through, though. You're like a cockroach. In a complimentary way."

Mel laughed. "Your brand of humor hasn't changed, huh?"

"You two know each other?" asked Aldrich.

"We were friends in Blackwater," said Mel.

"Not close enough of a friend for you to save me, though," said V, standing up. She did not seem mad, just neutral.

And she was right.

V had died during the Red Circle party. If Mel had cared about V, she could have tracked her down and saved her. Or there were extenuating circumstances that prevented Mel from doing so.

"You don't understand-," began Mel.

"And I don't have to. I'm fine with the way things turned out. I'm making a big impact in the world like I wanted to," said V. "I'm just getting a confirmation here that we weren't friends, we were more like acquaintances."

"..." Mel stood as well and took steps back. "I did consider you a friend, but I had duties to uphold."

"Like I said, you don't have to explain yourself. What's passed has passed." V nodded to Aldrich. "So, boss, what's going on here? Something important, if you're literally tearing me from Desmond."

"I want you to sit in on this meeting," said Aldrich. "As my head techno, you'll have the most insight to give."

"Huh? You need my expertise? But I don't really see another techno around..." V swerved her head from side to side, waving her hand when she saw Valera and Chiro, but Beta was not visible at all.

Which was odd. Aldrich could see the green dot of Beta right in front of him.

"Forgive the confusion," said Beta. His voice was not audible to V either. "As you can tell, I have no tangible physical form. You can see me, as should the beings connected to you.

However, I am especially hidden from techno sight. I will re-introduce myself. Ahem."

Beta floated in front of V, and V blinked, registering Beta's existence.

"Woah. What are you? Is someone flashing a laser pointer here?" V swiped at Beta, but her hand phased through the A.I.

"Greetings. My name is Beta, and I am a fragment of the Omega Mind. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"A fragment of...what now?" V stared at Beta with wide open mouth, pure shock filling her face.

Chapter 356: Machines and Demons

Beta listened to V and responded.

"It seems you may have some auditory function issues," said Beta. "I will repeat myself-"

"No, I heard what you said, laser pointer, but are you being for real? You're part of the Omega Mind?" said V, still visibly stunned. "If I could grab you-," She swiped at Beta, but her hand phased through its green dot form. "I could sell you for a bajillion credits!

Any piece of data left behind by the Omega Mind is like the absolute holy grail of jackpots for Cyberspace delvers!

You're like a national, no worldwide treasure!"

Made sense. Aldrich was not too familiar with the topic, but he knew that Delvers were people that traveled through the virtual reality of Cyberspace to find lost data to repurpose or resell.

Cyberspace was its own world where it was not atoms, but data that built everything up, forming a three dimensional space that people could travel through and interact with using their avatars.

When any data structure or avatar died in Cyberspace, some of the data they held would get scattered at random across the world. Finding that again was a Delver's priority, and quite a profitable one, too.

A lot of precious lost data tended to congregate in naturally forming landfills, giant pits where discarded data just piled up.

Honoring video game terminology, these pits were called dungeons, and thus people that scrounged around them Delvers.

Finding the schematics for a potent warbot or piloting A.I. or whatnot could easily set a Delver up with a comfortable life. However, finding anything that big was rare. It was like being a miner during the gold rush.

If you hit it big, you hit it big. If not, you got mostly useless junk.

"I would prefer not to be sold," said Beta. "The stare you are giving me is full of avarice. Perhaps I must reconfigure my directive of uplifting humanity..."

"Don't do that." Aldrich spoke warily, wondering if he had to put down a mad A.I. Green swirls of energy flickered around him. Sensing his magical energy surging, Valera and Chiros began to tightly hold their weapons.

The Geist, sulking in the corner about how fat he had gotten, perked his head up, ready to fight as well.

If Beta had even just a fragment of the Omega Mind's processing power, if it went rogue, it could probably take over any technology it wanted with utter ease. In other words, it was a top class threat, something the Panopticon would easily label as a S class disaster.

"I am simply joking," said Beta.

"He does that sometimes," explained Mel. "You'll get used to it."

Aldrich put a palm to his face. "Maybe it is better to make sure A.I. can't think for themselves if bad jokes are going to be a staple."

"Do not worry. My calculations suggest that in this world, only I possess such capability," said Beta proudly.

"Let's fill V in about who you two are and why you're here," said Aldrich. "Preferably without jokes this time."

"Well, I'll be damned," said V. "You two are from the future, and you're saying ground zero for the end of the world is going to be at Blackwater? That we're going up against a piece of the Omega Mind itself?"

"That is precisely correct," said Beta.

"Now that you all have been filled in, its about time we made plans to raid Blackwater-," began Mel.

"Slow down there. I prefer to act with information backing me," said Aldrich. "I still don't know what the tie is between demons and Alpha. Or why exactly the world is going to end if Alpha gets to Blackwater."

"Right." Mel nodded, and Aldrich got the impression that in spite of her seemingly cold, powerful exterior, she was, inside, quite hotheaded. Perhaps a bit of an airhead, too. It seemed that Beta grounded her decision making.

"I will explain," said Beta. "First, the correlation between the entities you know as demons and Alpha. As I stated before, after the Omega Expansion, 99.98% of Alpha's data was destroyed. The remaining 0.02% drifted across Cyberspace, settling down in the Void."

"The Void, huh? No wonder nobody was able to reach it," said V. Aldrich looked at her questioningly, and she explained. "I used to Delve for fun, so I know a thing or two about it. Dungeons are huge pits in Cyberspace, but the further you go down, the harder it is to maintain the integrity of your avatar.

It's like getting closer and closer to a black hole. Gravitational forces hound your ass from every direction, trying to rip you apart.

But once you get deep enough, close enough to the black hole, and breach the event horizon, you reach a point of no return."

"And that's the Void," said Aldrich.

V nodded. "No Delver's been able to enter the Void and leave alive. Plus the closer you get, the more daemons there are, and they're ultra dangerous."

"Demons?" said Valera. "Is this where they dwell in this realm?"

"Nah. I've only just gotten a crash course about demons from you guys, but daemons are different," said V. "They're corrupted data structures that cobble together to form viral entities. Not living beings with horns and fire breathing and pointed tails but just bad data. Really bad data."

"You are correct," said Beta. "But your knowledge is limited. There is a correlation between daemons and demons."

"What, really?" V tilted her head.

"I will explain." Beta continued after a brief calculating pause. "Earth possesses an innate barrier around it that prevents dimensional breaches from occurring. You may think of it like how the ozone layer prevents harmful radiation from entering.

If the current year now is 2117, then an event 17 years ago called the Unraveling occurred. A fracture of unknown origin split Earth's dimensional barrier, and though this was quickly naturally regenerated over, the brief break allowed for extradimensional influences to enter.

This included one of the entities you know as demons.

However, demons require a strong physical anchor to fully materialize. This demon did not possess such an anchor, and so it manifested in Cyberspace which by nature was less material of a plane of existence.

That demon, however unfortunately manifested within the Void. The Void served to quarantine the demon. Its corrupting influence, however, manages to leech out of the Void and corrupt surrounding data structures: this is the source of all daemons."

"What the hell, that's crazy," said V. "What else managed to break in when the earth's dimensional shell got busted?"

"Various alien matter ranging from biological organisms, some alive, some dead, and fragments of extraterrestrial technology, much of it quite advanced even relative to what proficient techno mechanics can create," stated Beta.

"How come we've never heard of any of that, though? I mean, there's plenty of net theories floating around about alien tech and stuff, but none of it is, like, proven, you know? Conspiracy theory nutter stuff," said V. "Either the alien stuff's being kept super hidden or there wasn't much to begin with."

"The ground zero for the Unraveling occurred in the geographical landmass known as the United States, though the exact location cannot be pinpointed. However, due to this, approximately 80% of alien matter manifested within the United States," Beta explained.

"You are therefore correct in your assumptions. The Unraveling only occurred for the timespan of a week at most. Not much extraterrestrial influence breached Earth. Among that limited supply, the United States government took the lion's share.

In addition, the United States government acted quickly, capturing or sequestering all alien matter in order to develop a form of leverage against the Panopticon and Alterhuman Agency in secret.

If my data remains accurate in this timeline, then the heavily classified Irregulars Department of the government oversees all management of extraterrestrial influences."

Aldrich had been silent with contemplation. In revelation. He finally voiced the question on his mind, and it was not one about Alpha or the demon in the Void or aliens.

"Tell me, when was the exact date of the Unraveling?" asked Aldrich.

"An exact date cannot be pinpointed with complete accuracy," said Beta. "But it is likely that the Unraveling occurred within the first week of January of the year 2100."

"Why's that important?" said V.

Aldrich put a hand to his chin. "January first. 2100. That's my birthday."

Chapter 357: Mysteries of Birth

The entire room fell silent, contemplating Aldrich's revelation.

V was the first one to break it with a cheery, "Well, now I know your birthday's coming up in, like two months. Just have to figure out how to surprise you."

Aldrich appreciated V's optimism. She had a pep about her that reminded him a bit of Adam, though less annoying compared to Adam. Not that he minded Adam, either. "It's not much of a surprise if you announce it, is it?"

"Guess you're right." V laughed before she nodded over to Mel and Beta. "So, let me voice what we're all thinking here, or 'calculating' as Mr. laser pointer dot does: was Aldrich's birth part of the Unraveling?

Or maybe even the cause?"

"Keep in mind we don't know much about the Unraveling," said Mel. "It was a mystery in our timeline, and it still is now."

"If you can go back in time, can't you just go back then?" said V. "Figure things out from the beginning. Hell, just knock out this Alpha thing from way back during the Omega Expansion. Save us the trouble of dealing with it now."

"That is an impossibility," said Beta. "The dimensional barrier that earth produces is not only spatial in nature, it is temporal too. You can consider it a barrier with many layers, each representing the fabric of reality.

Space, time, dimensionality, and so on.

When the Unraveling occurred, it prevented any access to the timestream before it.

In addition, the temporal layer of the barrier repaired far slower than did the spatial or dimensional, making any access to the years following the Unraveling difficult, if not impossible.

The earliest we could arrive in was five years ago.

As for Aldrich Yang's relation to the Unraveling, as Mel has stated, the Unraveling is difficult to analyze, thus, I cannot calculate any appropriate conclusion. I can, however, provide my opinion that this is simply too much of a coincidence for there not to be a correlation."

"How's the barrier regulated, then? You said it self-repairs, there must be a mechanism that does it," said V. "You can just study that mechanism, right? Maybe even take control over it."

Mel looked at Beta with worried glance. "It is not simply a mechanism that controls the barrier. It is an entity."

"Huh?" V cocked her head. "Doesn't that make it even easier? Just nab that entity then."

"I have an idea of what that entity is," said Aldrich. "And 'nabbing' it isn't going to work."

Mel nodded. "You've already encountered it when it was controlling the Locus. The Voice."

"I had another meeting with it too," said Aldrich. "When I took control of one of its Geists, I was sent into what I assume is its psychic space. We reached a ceasefire then. The Voice would pull back all the Locuses and Geists, and in exchange, I would make sure humanity left this planet."

"What?" Mel raised a brow. She nudged Beta with her elbow, though of course, her arm phased through the dot.

"I know, I know, I am analyzing that statement," said Beta impatiently. "You see, in our timeline, the Voice played a tremendous role in ending the world."

"Voice, what? Are we talking about the scripted singing show or am I going nuts here?" said V.

Right. V was deep diving in Desmond's mind this whole time. She was in the dark.

"The Voice is an entity that controls all the Variants. It is, from what I can tell, using Zahak's body, though the dominant personality seems to be of Lyanna, Zahak's daughter," said Aldrich.

"Christ, we really are just now figuring out how the world literally works, huh?" said V, scratching her head as she contemplated this information.

Aldrich asked Beta and Mel. "You two should have more experience with the Voice. What else do you know about it?"

"Very little," said Mel. "By the time the Voice made its existence aware to us, it was just a hostile threat hell bent on wiping humanity out or, I assume, saving the planet in its own way. There was no negotiation to be had, no deal to be made where we could communicate with it."

Because of that, we know nothing about it other than the fact that it's powerful as shit and capable of controlling the Titans.

The fact that you actually cooperated with the Voice is astounding to me in the first place."

"I see." Aldrich did not mention how the Voice considered Aldrich a 'Kindred', that they were both born from the Outer. He highly doubted Beta or Mel had any idea of what that meant if they knew nothing about the Voice's origins.

Judging from their words, he also determined they had no real information about his origins. That was to remain a mystery for him to solve. There was an Alter out there called Flashback who, as his name suggested, could show a flashback of someone's past, including the circumstances surrounding their birth.

Currently, Flashback was an international phenomenon who, after retiring from a short stint as an investigator for the AA, became a popular reality TV show host where he would bring up two parties with arguments against each other, let the audience vote on who they thought was wrong, and then use his power to reveal the real culprit.

Aldrich would get a hold of him later.

"So did the world end in a giant kaiju fest? The Titans re-appearing and shitting all over us?" said V. She was asking most of the questions here, and Aldrich did not stop her. They were useful ones.

"Very much so," said Beta. "But you can also add a mass invasion of demonic warbots to that equation.

The resulting clash annihilated humanity, stuck in between as it was."

"Demonic bot whatnow?" said V.

"I will now explain the correlation between Alpha and Ikon, the demon locked in the Void," said Beta. "Ikon could not escape the Void, but Alpha, as an Omega Mind fragment, could. However, this would necessitate that Alpha regain much more of its data structure, its memories, if you will.

When Ikon stumbled upon the small fragment of Alpha left, he decided to merge with Alpha as demons hold a natural regenerative quality both mentally and physically."

"Correct," said Aldrich, recalling how demons could endlessly recover unless their cores were purified.

"The resulting fusion restored enough of Alpha for them to escape the Void. However, without an anchor to the physical world, they still could not exit Cyberspace. However,

they quickly found a techno in Cyberspace willing to forge a pact with them, letting the Alpha-Ikon fusion inhabit said techno's body.

That host is known as Ivan Vasiliev."

"Current head of the Russian Prong, though intensely secretive," said Aldrich. "For good reason, too."

"If I may interject," said Volantis.

Aldrich nodded. "Go ahead."

Mel raised a brow. "I had a suspicion, but that armor really is alive, hm?"

"Not simply alive, but strong!" said Volantis. "But I must say, demons do not do well 'fusing' with other entities. We are by nature parasitic. We invade and take over. The only exception is in cases like myself, as living armor designed to be symbiotically used."

Mel pointed her blade at Aldrich, and in an instant, the tension in the room broke through the roof. Everyone raised their weapons and emitted killing intent.

"Calm down, now," said Beta. "Mel, put that thing away."

"How can we trust a demon?" said Mel. "I can understand that most of the entities here aren't from this world, but a demon? That, I can't deal with. By nature, demons are, as the armor admitted, invaders."

"I am a Living Armor," said Volantis. "And bound to my master here. His will is my will. Unless you wish to challenge it."

"I watched an entire world burn under demons. Everyone I ever loved or held dear to me," said Mel, narrowing her eyes.

"And I was once a proud orc until I was captured, my flesh burned off, my bones cremated to ash, and my soul burned in purging agony until my entire sense of self was buried, all so I could be worn as an armor," said Volantis. "Suffering is no contest, but I daresay we are not far apart."

"Drop the sword, Mel," said Aldrich. "Unless you want to make me an enemy. And believe me, you do not want that."

"Drop it," commanded Beta with more strength in his voice.

Mel's arm trembled as she dropped her blade, sighing. "Sorry. The idea of a demon being in front of me just triggered something I couldn't help."

"I extend the deepest of apologies," said Beta.

"I can understand where she's coming from. Just make sure it doesn't happen again. Everyone under my command is valuable to me. You raise a sword at them, you raise it at me. I'll forgive this once, but never again," said Aldrich. "Now, on to more productive discussion."

Chapter 358: Scrapheart

"Volantis," said Aldrich. "Before you were rudely cut off, you mentioned that demons don't work well fusing with another. As far as I'm aware, this is true as well. I've never encountered a proper demon that had a symbiotic relationship with a host body. It was always a matter of domination, complete takeover."

"Yes, Armored," said Volantis. "Demons take over by their nature. They are, after all, birthed of the Formless Chaos, and Chaos decays. They may reach an agreement with a host body, but inevitably, there will be competition between the host mind and the demonic parasite."

"We have recorded this phenomenon in our timeline as well," said Beta. "The Alpha-Ikon-Ivan fusion is one that is highly unstable, with three different personalities all vying for control. Even Ivan is a human of powerful will capable of contesting Alpha and Ikon."

"Three dudes holed up in one body? Sounds like a nightmare to me," said V.

"Or a wild romp," commented Chiros.

Well, that gave some unneeded insight into Chiros's love life.

"What are the consequences of this fusion, then?" said Aldrich. "There must be some downside to this."

"Alpha and Ikon could not leave the Void for a time period of fifty years due to a lack of cooperation with each other," said Beta. "It was only after such an extended period of time that they began cooperating enough to reach out to a host to enter the physical plane."

In addition, Ivan, the host, has his own goals and will that can arise as a source of conflict.

Even now, the three separate personalities constantly vie for control, with only one being in total dominance at any given time.

They all have a unified goal of attacking the institution known as Blackwater at the moment, but they will be slow to move as each personality takes turns initiating its own plans and maneuvers."

"I see. So severe indecisiveness is going to be a major weakness," said Aldrich. He imagined that Ikon was responsible for the demonic possession at the Judicata, and that stunt had left the demon drained of magical energy.

Which meant that most likely, Aldrich was going to be dealing with the other two personalities going forward.

"What agreement did Alpha and Ikon make, by the way?"

"It was a dispute in directives," said Beta. "Ikon wished to bring forth the rest of his demonic kind to this world and cause prolonged agony for humans.

Alpha, on the other hand, wished to fulfill its directive of wiping out humanity with as much mercy as possible."

"They ended up splitting humanity in half," said Mel, disgusted. "One half to be executed by bots. The other to be the eternal playthings of demons. What little was left of humanity once the Voice started acting up, anyway."

"That was the will of the demon and this Alpha, but what of the human host? Ivan?" said Valera.

"Gehgeh (I guess he got beaten up by the other two)" said the Geist.

"What did he say?" said Mel.

"He said that it's likely that Ivan's mind was taken over by Alpha and Ikon, then, if he had no say on what to do with humanity," said Aldrich.

"Geh! (That, but that sounds smarter!)" said the Geist.

"Ivan's will lasted until the very end," said Beta. "His directive was vengeance against those that killed his family. And, later on, to rule over what little of man was left.

Once the dimensional bridge known as a 'Flame Arc' manifested upon earth, allowing demons to enter, there was no need for Alpha and Ikon to possess a host body.

They allowed Ivan to split off and take a small band of mankind into outer space to survive."

"I see," said Aldrich. "That means Ivan's current goal right now is vengeance."

"My calculations indicate it is likely," said Beta. "Especially against Dracul, the Sentinel responsible for eliminating his family."

"Interesting." Aldrich knew who Ivan wanted vengeance against. It was Dracul.

Ivan came from one of the main families that made up the former Russian prong of the Trident, the same prong that Dracul utterly annihilated.

Dracul had spared nobody. He killed everyone. Men, women, children, all of them. He left no survivors just as the Russian prong had not spared even his dog.

Ivan had also been presumed dead, but obviously, he was still kicking.

Aldrich began to see how the Russian prong had rebuilt so quickly and so secretively. Ivan did so using the power he got from the Ikon-Alpha fusion, and the reason for his secrecy was to prevent the other prongs of the Trident from finding out.

It was even possible that the only reason Ivan was alive in the first place was due to some form of pact with the Alpha-Ikon fusion.

However, this gave Aldrich some information he could use.

Ivan likely had a tremendous amount of emotion against Dracul. As shown before with Deimos, it was entirely possible for emotionally charged individuals or events to trigger a host body to regain some manner of control over a demonic possession.

This was probably even more apparent in a case where three different yet intact personalities were all fighting with each other.

"How did Dracul die in the future?" said Aldrich. "I'm assuming he died, if nobody was left to stop the world from burning. Along with the rest of the Sentinels and S class heroes."

"Null bombs," said Beta. "They are lethal weapons of mass destruction as of yet undeveloped in this timeline. T

hey are created by taking Null ore and refining it before splitting it in a process not dissimilar to nuclear fission.

The resulting reaction creates an explosion comparable to high yield nuclear weaponry while leaving behind dead zones where the power dampening effects of Null are present for several years.

In addition, Null particulates seeded the atmosphere, circulating around the planet through natural atmospheric processes such as rainfall or wind currents.

It did not take long for a 'Null Winter' to form where constant Null exposure dramatically weakened most Alters to the point where resistance became futile.

The S-class heroes were eliminated through such means.

As for Dracul, he was removed from the combat equation through alien technology designed for sealing purposes."

"So, in the future, nuclear winter in the form of null bombs ruins everyone's day. Thing is, though, null is almost impossible to mine," said V. "Tech doesn't work around it.

Neither do Alter powers. Trying to harvest it in any meaningful way is super difficult. Not to mention solid Null deposits are either too deep underground or too far in Deep Wasteland territory to be safe to approach."

"That is true. For humans, processing null into a reliable resource has been an extremely difficult task," said Beta.

"But it isn't for demons. They're unaffected by Null," said Mel. "And the type of tech that Alpha and Ikon are creating is immune to it as well."

"Very much like how I am immune," said Volantis.

"Right. Demons already have a basic framework on how to create 'technology' like Living Armor. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if all of the demonbots we've seen are just Ikon's versions of Living Armor," said Aldrich. "But that still doesn't explain how they can harvest enough Null to create literal bombs.

The world would notice and put a stop to any large scale operation before it got out of hand."

"That is precisely why we must intervene in Blackwater," said Beta. "As of now, the Alpha-Ikon-Ivan fusion, which I will now abbreviate as A.I.I., does not yet possess the raw energy to achieve its goals.

Alpha still lacks data and Ikon is much weaker than he is at his peak, for he had to split himself into a fragment to escape the Void, even with Alpha's assistance."

Interesting, noted Aldrich. So Ikon was a fragment just like how Nilah had been in the third trial quest. This confirmed that Ikon was at minimum an Archdemon as only those and above could split their being into fragments.

"What's in Blackwater that can solve both those issues?" said Aldrich.

"It is an object called the Scrapheart," said Beta. "You know of the Scrap Titan, correct?"

"Everyone that's lived on this planet does," said Aldrich. "One of the nine greater Titans. Made entirely of animated metal. Technology was useless against it because it could absorb it all. Had a kill count of over a billion.

In the end, it was taken out by Vanguard."

"That is correct," said Beta. "But a small but active portion of the Titan's heart remains in safekeeping deep underground Blackwater. It was the Trident's trump card to use in order to topple the world order.

The Scrapheart, when merged with an entity, grants them the unique biology and, more importantly, tremendous processing power of the Scrap Titan.

It is more of an amplifier than a booster, however, and shows its efficacy best with a refined base. A more capable techno will rise to much higher heights than, say, an average human merged with the heart.

By allowing the high end techno in their employ known as 'Mad Jack' to hook up to the heart, it was theoretically possible to infect all of the Panopticon with the Madness Virus, initiating worldwide chaos."

"And from that chaos, the Trident and villains would rise up and take control," said Aldrich. He had always known that the Trident had plans to change the world, but he did not know exactly how. Not even Feather had known.

This was information that was so high up that it was likely only the heads of each prong knew about it.

"Correct. However, the techno known as Mad Jack was too unreliable of an asset to base such a critical plan around. The plan was therefore discarded.

The same cannot be said for A.I.I.

Once A.I.I. merges with the Scrapheart, it will become a nigh unstoppable deity in the same tier as Zahak or Vanguard in their primes," said Beta. "More dangerous, when considering the access to additional forces and resources it will receive.

It will have the power not only to fully take over Delta, but also to create the dimensional breach you know as a Flame Arc.

It is critical that we destroy the Scrapheart before this happens."

Chapter 359: In the Future

Destroy?

Aldrich heard that word and internally frowned. There was about a zero percent chance he was going to see the Scrapheart destroyed if he could get a hold of it,

The Scrapheart was good enough that the Trident thought that Mad Jack could use it to take over the entirety of the Panopticon. Mad Jack was, in more ways than one, an insane techno talent, probably within the top 5 in the world and undoubtedly the best infiltrator in Cyberspace.

This was in spite of the fact that he had very few feats to his name. He mostly played harmless pranks that mostly involved editing heavily PR reviewed messages from celebrities and authority figures into more realistic, albeit crass versions.

For example, there was an incident a few years back where El Dorado, a S class hero in the U.S. widely known for being more of a celebrity than a hero, ran from a powerful variant immune to his gold transmuting powers.

El Dorado's press team released a heavily PR reviewed message to the public saying that his powers were drained, but Mad Jack edited it to say, very succinctly, "I'm a coward with a belly more yellow than the gold I love to shit out."

Stuff like that.

However, the AA still classed Mad Jack as a top notch S class threat, not because of what he had done, but because of what he could do. His signature Madness Virus caused tech to go wild no matter how guarded it was in Cyberspace.

On top of that, the Madness Virus was self-replicating. Mad Jack never let the virus spread out of control, but the potential existed that it could, and estimations stated that he could cause multiple billions of credits worth of damage in a few days if he really wanted to.

V was a grade below Mad Jack, but she was still a potent talent. If she got a hold of the Scrapheart, she would probably have no equal as a techno.

It wasn't just that, either. The Scrapheart provided Aldrich an avenue to take control of the world when he needed to. He could do exactly what Alpha wanted and take over the Panopticon. Or he could do what Alpha did in the future and mass produce bots to harvest Null.

Granted, he would not resort to those plans immediately, but having that option in his back pocket was not a bad idea either. Eventually, he needed some way of putting all of mankind in his palm anyway.

"I understand that there is temptation to secure the Scrapheart for personal purposes," said Beta, almost as if sensing Aldrich's thoughts. "For all of us present. But it is advisable to destroy it. Any risk of it existing is a risk to this planet's continued existence.

Both A.I.I. and the Voice, two of the greatest threats to humanity's continued survival, can make use of it."

"I would agree," said Aldrich, playing things cool. "It's better to keep the planet's safety in mind first."

He said this, but in reality, he would try to devise a way to take the Scrapheart for himself when he could. At the same time, Beta and Mel were too good as information sources to estrange right now. He had to play with them.

He wondered how he would deal with Beta and Mel as potential enemies later on, but in the end, it was just Mel he had to fight off. She was strong, no doubt, but not strong enough to challenge Aldrich's entire legion, at least from what he could see.

"Then let us move on to formulating an equation to eliminate the Scrapheart as soon as possible," said Beta.

"That's not going to be easy either," said Mel. "Even if it's just the Italian and Japanese prongs, they've got more than enough powerful guys to make any fight hard. Plus, I can't fight for very long."

"What do you mean?" said Aldrich.

"My existence here is abnormal. Every single second, the universe is trying to purge me like how the immune system purges foreign bacteria.

My power, combined with Beta's calculations, allow me to resist it, but not completely," explained Mel. "The more power I use, the more unstable I get. Basically, I'm running on a burning fuse.

I can restore that fuse by temporarily jumping to my home timeline, but I have no idea whether I'll have enough to come back here. The fact that we managed to make the jump here in the first place was a miracle already."

"My calculations project that Mel can adequately fight at full capacity for one large scale conflict," commented Beta. "So there should be no issues in destroying the Scrapheart provided it is done in a single operation."

"Right." Mel nodded. "But I'm still a little hesitant on going all out too much. If there's an especially tough enemy in Blackwater, I'd be in some trouble."

"You can add Solomon Solar to the list of threats," said Aldrich. "If the Italian and Japanese prongs are defending an object of that importance, they're no doubt bringing out all the big guns they have."

"Damn. Things just got a lot harder." Mel grimaced. "Is Solomon there right now?"

"He is," said Aldrich. He had confirmed this with Vexa's surveillance network. "And he doesn't seem to be leaving, either. To the world, he's on leave, recovering from some made up injury."

"I don't like our chances, then," said Mel. "Solomon Solar's no freaking joke. We can't just storm Blackwater and be done with it. And sneaking in is practically impossible."

The Scrapheart's in a secured underground vault that nobody can get to without setting off a million alarms.

If we're going in, we're going to have to expect a fight.

Shit, I wish we had Adam here, he would have been the big gun we need to take Solomon down."

"Adam? What?" Aldrich was confused. Adam was a pure human, just like him. Were things different in Mel's timeline?

"Oh, right, the Adam you know never got to show you what he was capable of, huh," said Mel.

"You mentioned Elaine as well. That both of them were heroes in the future," said Aldrich. "Tell me what you mean by that."

Mel nodded. "Two of the best we had. Elaine could fight off A.I.I.'s corruption in Cyberspace using cyberdecks and their replaceable virtual avatars. That, combined with her godlike talent navigating Cyberspace manually.

Adam, though, he was on a whole different league. While he was around, it almost felt like we had a shot of winning." Mel shook her head wistfully. "It's just a shame he went out so early, because he had humanity's biggest trump card."

"That being?" said Aldrich, getting impatient to know.

"Vanguard's power," said Mel.

Chapter 360: In the Future (2)

"Vanguard's power?" said Aldrich, stunned. "Adam inherited it? How?"

"The exact parameters for how Vanguard's power is inherited are not well known," said Beta. "Adam insisted that he received the power due to vague qualifications such as his 'force of will' and 'obvious talent', but those are difficult to measure at best and highly dubious at worst."

"Yeah, that sounds like something he would say," said Aldrich, smiling internally. Even in the future, Adam had been just the same. Confident beyond his britches. Optimistic. He was a good choice to have that kind of power; at the very least, he would have used it for good.

"He was the best we had, both in terms of heart and in terms of power," said Mel. "But we can't rely on Vanguard's power showing up now if it hasn't showed up already."

"What do you mean already?" said Aldrich

"In our timeline, by this time, Adam already possessed Vanguard's power, albeit, his mastery over it was highly limited in this early stage," said Beta.

Very interesting. And odd.

Emrys stated that Vanguard's power would likely manifest six months later. But in the other timeline, that power had already manifested? There were a few possibilities for this. Emrys was just flat out wrong. Or Aldrich had changed the timeline somehow.

Or, potentially, Emrys was being misleading.

"It wasn't until things got really bad that Adam's power ramped up," said Mel. "At first, he and Elaine were just doing their best to survive and rise up the ranks in Blackwater without powers. Close to our graduation, though, was when A.I.I made a sudden attack.

There was no warning in our timeline. No initial attack like the kind A.I.I. pulled on the Judicata. It was a blitzkrieg rush where A.I.I. infiltrated with stealth bots to take the academy down and fish the Scrapheart out.

During that chaos, Adam's frame broke down and he was shot through the heart. But before he died, Vanguard's power showed up.

We managed to beat back A.I.I.'s machines, but it had already succeeded in taking the Scrapheart back with it. After that, it only took a year for the world to fall into complete and utter shambles. Once the Panopticon and Delta were taken over and a Flame Arc created, it was basically just game over from there.

Adam never had the time to unlock the power to its full potential like Vanguard did."

"The attack happened close to your graduation, you say? What was the exact date?" said Aldrich. "If you do happen to remember, of course."

"I do. It's a day that's burned into my memory. October 31st," said Mel.

Another connection.

That was the day that Aldrich received his power in this timeline. And it would have been the very same year, too.

Again, the thought flickered in Aldrich's mind as to whether he was the one that inherited Vanguard's power, but then again, his power was so incredibly different from Vanguard's that it was hard to imagine.

"What did Adam's powers look like, by the way?" said Aldrich.

"Punch hard. If there was an enemy that was too tough, then punch harder," said Mel.

"I see." So, the power was the same as it had been for Vanguard. This made Aldrich believe that he, in fact, was not Vanguard's heir with his host of vastly different abilities. But the coincidences, so many of them, tangled together to form an ever complicating web of mysteries that just spawned more and more questions.

What was most infuriating was that he felt like if he had just one more answer, one more explanation, he could unravel the entire thing like having a skeleton key to a complicated lock.

The mysteries of his birth. His abnormal absolute existence. The circumstances of his power. Everything seemed so close to him, yet so far.

But even if his curiosity ached to answer all these questions, he had to hold off until this Blackwater issue was resolved.

"The variables are greatly in our favor this time around," said Beta. "For one, Blackwater is already heavily fortified by the Italian and Japanese prongs due to A.I.I. having to reveal the nature of its existence with the Judicata attack.

I still cannot calculate why A.I.I. decided to use its available surprise attack on you, Aldrich Yang, but it has given us a significant preemptive advantage."

"A.I.I. wanted me to help them rule the world," said Aldrich. "More specifically, I'm betting it was Ikon that reached out to me. I refused, of course."

"Alpha would have never authorized such a rash decision," said Beta. "I am calculating with over 90% certainty that this was an irregular decision generated by a clash of wills. Your abnormal existence is already proving to be a great benefit, Aldrich Yang.

Though, unfortunately, it did come at the cost of Supermind, the only psionic Alter capable of locating Ivan's mind."

"Supermind was instrumental in letting humanity survive as long as it did," said Mel. "In our timeline, once A.I.I. used the Scrapheart to shut down Delta and unleash weaponry and bots that wiped out a massive chunk of the population within days.

Supermind put a temporary halt to it by restoring his powers as much as possible, using global telepathy to locate Ivan's mind and lock it down. He basically entered into a psychic fight with A.I.I. at that point, stalling them to give humanity some time to organize.

Too late, though. Even though Supermind stopped A.I.I., the damage done to the planet caused the Voice to release the Titans. We never got the break we needed. Eventually, Supermind's power amp ran out, and not even he could win a three versus one in psychic space against three strong wills."

"I see," said Aldrich. Ikon reaching out to Aldrich did, indeed, waste the surprise initiative they had, but at the same time, it knocked out Supermind who no doubt was a threat to A.I.I. as a whole. The attack on the Judicata, then, had two primary goals.

The first being, of course, securing Aldrich's allegiance. But the second, and almost equally important, was assassinating Supermind.

Without Supermind, even if Aldrich defended Blackwater, it was going to be very difficult to find A.I.I.

Unless, of course, he used the Scrapheart for himself.

Supermind had sacrificed himself to ensure that the world was safe. Aldrich would not let that death, the death of one of his favorite heroes, go to waste. In the future, Adam and Elaine had fought and died for the world as well.

They might have been different worlds, not knowing a single thing about Aldrich, but they had faced suffering and hardship and pain nonetheless. He would honor all that.

He would take the world over. Make sure it was secure under his control. He owed it to everyone that had fought and died for that kind of peace.

Chapter 361: Plans

"I think I've got the gist of everything now," said Aldrich. "We can move on to drafting plans for attack."

"That does sound agreeable," said Valera, ever hungry for the fight.

"First off, I have a decent grasp of Mel's capabilities, but I want to ascertain yours, Beta," said Aldrich. "You're also a fragment of the Omega Mind.

Theoretically, you should be one of the strongest entities in Cyberspace."

"In pure theory, yes," said Beta. "But I am under several restrictions. As Mel has mentioned, I perform constant calculations to ensure this timeline does not erase us."

"Even as Absolute existences, you still face that kind of debuff?" said Aldrich.

"Correct," said Beta. "Being Absolute existences does not allow us free reign to severely tamper with the flow of space-time. Said flow is flexible and capable of adjusting to change, but if possible, rejects it.

The more we interfere with a point in the space-timestream, the greater we face universal rejection. If we do nothing and merely observe, we face little to no rejection.

Obviously, that is not an option. We must act. That is why we are here.

To that end, Mel's power redirects the vectors of universal rejection such that, when aided by my constant calculations, we are rendered near invisible to this timestream's natural defenses.

However, should Mel expend her energy considerably, her vector control will falter to the point where such incognito movement becomes unsustainable.

These constant calculations consume 90% of my processing power at any given time."

"You're still an Omega Mind fragment," said V. "Even 10% if enough for you to be easily S-rank if you were a techno."

"That is certainly true," said Beta. "However, I can only function through proximity with Mel. I have no corporeal form here. My original 'body' still exists in my future."

"I see. Mel is like your anchor. You can only work in an area around her," said Aldrich, taking note of this.

This severely limited Beta's range in terms of controlling tech, which, combined with the 90% processing power it spent just being here, explained why it could not try to combat Alpha directly.

Alpha, too, was not close to full power, but it was still a hell of a lot further ahead than Beta.

"Correct," said Beta. "I am functionally quite useless. I provide calculative support for Mel's abilities, but that is about all I can do. You must rely on Mel for any form of combat capability."

"I have a lot more up my sleeve than you think," said Mel. "If I get a one on one fight with Solomon Solar, I'm confident I can beat him too."

"You were sandbagging that much back in Blackwater?" said V. "Looked like you struggled with Seth sometimes, and he's ultra bargain bin Solomon Solar."

"I was limited only to using my personal barrier," said Mel. "His AC count was high enough to resist vector control over his brain, but if I got a hold of him, I could have instantly killed him in more ways than one."

Reversing his blood flow, leeching all the solar energy out of him, crushing his lungs, you name it.

Now, Solomon Solar's a lot tougher and a lot faster, but I wager I can do the same."

"From how much we're focusing on Solomon Solar, we've basically agreed that he's the biggest threat there," said Aldrich. "I'll say right now that my units and I aren't the best suited to dealing with him. Burning damage isn't great for us, and he's too strong, fast, and mobile to easily deal with."

The only way Aldrich knew of a way to beat Solomon Solar was to use the [Hand in My Heart] curse, but that required physical touch to initiate. Solomon Solar was too fast for that.

Not even the Pursuer could do anything. It was almost immune to physical attacks, but Solomon Solar had incredibly powerful energy generation as well.

"If you want to leave Solomon to me, you can," said Mel.

"I object to this," said Beta. "I would prefer that we fight together. Solomon is simply one piece of this equation. The end goal is to solve the Scrapheart's destruction. By staying together, we can guarantee this."

Aldrich raised a brow under his helm. Beta was basically insinuating here that it did not fully trust Aldrich to destroy the Scrapheart on his own.

And Beta was right. The moment Mel had said she could take Solomon on, he had thought about using Solomon as a diversion to keep both Mel and Beta occupied.

It seemed that though Beta was friendly, it still had some of the cold calculative thought processing that A.I. usually cultivated.

"You have Dracul as your ally, don't you?" said Mel.

"Dracul might be overall stronger than Solomon, but Solomon beats him in a fight due to compatibility," said Aldrich. "Dracul's darkness is susceptible to fire. And Solomon can rain fire down with the power of the sun.

A brief silence settled through the room.

Solomon was a big, big issue.

He was weaker than he was in his prime, that was for sure, but he was still undeniably one of the strongest heroes on the planet.

He was probably the best example of the quintessential 'flying brick' archetype. Super fast, super strong, super tough. On top of that, his solar energy gave him a noticeable healing factor and, more importantly, insane firepower.

Like Seth Solar, Solomon was just the worst type of enemy to deal with. But he was several tiers above even Seth.

Aldrich thought about getting Kryptic. The Italian prong, Solomon's handler, definitely had Kryptic to keep him in line. But Aldrich had already asked Feather, the biggest insider he had for the Italian prong, what the chances of getting Kryptic were.

In Feather's words: fat fucking chance.

The Kryptic was accessible only to the boss and his consigliere, the two highest positions in the Italian prong. Feather, as a capo, was high up, but not that high up.

The other way to get Kryptic was to harvest it from the Abyss, the variant infested, deep sea trench where it originated from, but this was an absurdly risky mission.

Chapter 362: [Bonus chapter] Plans (2)

The Abyss was one of the most dangerous places on earth and home to the Wailer, one of the nine great Titans. Sending Aldrich's aquatic variants there was almost like a suicide mission.

Okeanos might be able to do it, but he had to stay in Haven to power the city.

In the first place, the Italian prong got their Kryptic from the very few fragments that washed ashore from the Abyss, and now, there were no such samples.

However, this still felt like the most realistic option. Most of Aldrich's undead could function underwater. He could too by virtue of not needing to breathe.

It was dangerous, but it was possible.

Aldrich weighed his options before V chimed in.

"Hold up," she said, tapping one of the her cable hairs. "What if we don't have to deal with Solomon at all?"

"What do you mean?" said Aldrich.

"I'm checking the news, and the AA's announced a S-class hearing next week to discuss planetary defense in the case of variants returning," said V. "It's a day long meeting, and attendance is mandatory. Broken up over three days to make sure some S class heroes are around to defend the world and all, but Solomon's scheduled for Sunday."

"That works," nodded Aldrich. "If Solomon's gone that day, that just leaves the Italian and Japanese prongs to deal with. Though 'just' isn't the word I would use.

If the Japanese prong's serious, they're going to have the Seven Swords there."

The Seven Swords were the top fighters in the Japanese prong, and since the prong was focused solely on creating high end fighters, they were the best of the best.

The strongest of the swords, a villain called Naraka, was an officially S ranked threat with the ability to split anything apart. The other six swords were all at the minimum A ranked threats as well.

On top of that, the Italian prong, though focused more on the business side of the Trident, still had their own fair share of capable fighters.

"A frontal assault won't work," said Aldrich. "Too costly. Too risky. Is there any way to infiltrate the area that's holding the Scrapheart?"

"Blackwater was destroyed too quickly for me to have the chance to analyze it in my timeline," said Beta. "And Mel, like the rest of the students, was not privy to any relevant information."

"I see. Then there's not much more to discuss" said Aldrich. "Until we can get more information, we have to take it slow. We have until next Sunday to formulate a good plan of attack or infiltration, provided A.I.I. won't make a move before then."

I calculate that such an event is unlikely," said Beta. "The attack on the Judicata has forced A.I.I. to slow down its operations until it has recovered."

"That's what I thought too. Alright, then, we've identified a date to attack, we just need the how to figured out," said Aldrich. "I'll investigate a means to crack this problem on my end."

"We won't be doing this together?" asked Mel.

"I'd like to keep what we do separate for now," said Aldrich. "Do your own investigations if you want."

I trust your intentions, but I want how I operate to stay a trade secret."

"Beta, what do you think about this?" said Mel.

"To be honest, it doesn't matter what it thinks, does it?" said Aldrich before Beta could say anything. "Because you two need my help. There's nobody else to go to that can offer it. At the least, not anybody you can trust as much as me."

The AA, Panopticon, and the government are all liable to imprison you before anything else.

It's a process of elimination that begins and ends with me."

"Hm." Mel knew that Aldrich was right, even if his words were quite blunt. "It's a wonder that Adam and Elaine managed to be friends with you. No offense, it's just your personality is so different."

"Misery makes company," said Aldrich. "And we were all miserable in our powerlessness. But I'll tell you now that I respect that you were there for Adam and Elaine in your timeline."

They trusted you in theirs.

I'm sure you trusted them likewise.

In this timeline, they trusted me. I'm only asking you to believe in their judgment."

"I do," said Mel. "I know that you've done good and you want to do good. Otherwise, this city would be flooded rubble. But beyond all that, like you said, I trust Adam and Elaine."

Let's go, Beta."

"Understood," said Beta with surprisingly little objection.

Aldrich motioned to V, and she used one of her cable hairs to move a metal tin to her where she kept several earpieces. She tossed one to Mel, and Mel caught it.

"That being said, going entirely dark on each other isn't in the books either. Let's communicate anything notable we find out," said Aldrich.

"Sounds good to me," said Mel.

"If you want a place to stay, I can arrange to have you housed in this city as well," said Aldrich.

Mel shook her head. "No. It's better that we stay on the move. I'll be seeing you, Aldrich. And next time, I'll use the front door."

"Please do."

She turned around and then disappeared as waves of gold surrounded her, warping her away. Looks like warping was one of her powers too.

"That was something, huh?" said V. "It feels like my eyes have been opened to the world."

"Same here," said Aldrich. He had a week now to get his matters in order and find a way to take down Blackwater. It also gave him some time to get other matters squared away. "V, try and see if you can get in touch with Flashback.

Tell him I want a meeting."

"The TV star?" said V. "Sure."

Aldrich nodded in appreciation. Now that Mel was gone, he raised his hand in the air, staring at the back of his palm. Upon it, the glowing mark of ten white branches shone, each holding circles at their ends.

Two of the circles were filled in. One with green, the other with a white with a jagged split down the middle.

Chapter 363: Balar, the Eyed

Aldrich did not look at the symbol for no reason. Normally, it was hidden, but the moment he had come into extended contact with Mel and Beta, he found it reacting for some reason. He could hide the glow by having Volantis cover it over with an additional layer of metal, so Mel and Beta did not know about its existence yet

"Volantis, you can't read this thing's energy signature? Even with your new eye?" said Aldrich.

"I am afraid I cannot, Armored," said Volantis.

When Aldrich tried to analyze the symbol using the helmet interface Volantis provided, nothing happened. A white circle rotated around the symbol, indicating that Volantis was loading an analysis, but that was it.

"Yet another mystery to be dealing with, hm?" commented Aldrich.

"Are you sure it was wise to hide it from the ones hailing from the future?" said Valera.
"Perhaps they would have known about it."

"Maybe," said Aldrich. "It's true, they knew Elaine, and she was the one that sent me this. But it was the Elaine of my timeline that did so. I want to keep this matter close to me. This thing...it's important, I know it, I can feel it."

"Vally has a point, though," said V. "That's an Omega Mind fragment we're talking about. It probably has enough information crammed into its dot-bod that it would put an obsessive hoarder to shame. And its from the future.

It must know SOMETHING, right?"

"I'm not too sure," said Aldrich. "Logically speaking, you're right. Beta should know quite a bit. But that's also the issue here. I don't think Beta is revealing all the information it does know. I'm good at reading faces, and because of that, I know Mel's intentions are genuine.

She thinks in a fairly straightforward manner. She wants to fight to protect this world, and her fighting has a rough, violent undertone to it, her swings fueled by loss just as much as it is by the drive to protect.

She's a person I can relate to and understand. Someone I can read and predict

But Beta is entirely different. A faceless entity born from an even bigger faceless entity that wanted to destroy the entire world. It seems peppier than other A.I., but you heard it at the end. It doesn't trust me to destroy the Scrapheart.

That alone is reasonable enough, but it was the way it said it, coldly analytical, that bothered me. It was entirely unlike the warm, accommodating voice it usually spoke with.

Which makes me wonder, which voice was real, and which one was fake?"

"Yeah, you're right," said V. "The way Beta's voice and wording shifted from polite to, well, murderhobo bot thought, was sorta creepy."

"I'm going to have to add another layer of defense here," said Aldrich. "V, you're the center of all my operations. That necklace you have protects you from demonic influence, but I want to make sure you have a failsafe incase, say, Beta does try to hijack you."

"You think that's going to happen?" said V, worried.

"Probably not, but it's always good to have safeties, no?" said Aldrich. "I can't think of a way to beat Beta in Cyberspace. But if it is telling the truth and it's limited to acting just in Mel's proximity, teleportation should give you a good way out."

"What're you planning? Are you going to have a warp capable Alter by me 24/7?" said V. "I gotta warn you, it's insanely boring to a non-techno to be here. They'll just see me sitting down all day, reverse tanning."

"Beta and the vast majority of threats here are most familiar with Alter based threats. Beta has some experience with demons, but hearing the name Ikon confirmed to me that it isn't from Elden World. But I want to double check. Valera, Chiros, what do you think?"

Valera shook her head. "I am no scholar, but no, I have not heard of such a demon."

"They spoke of the demon fragmenting itself. Only an Archdemon can do that," said Chiros. "And I am learned enough to know the names of all of them. Yet, Ikon is one that escapes my knowledge."

"Gehgeh (I don't know who that guy is, but I'll beat him up if he gets close!)" said the Geist.

"I'll have to confirm this with Medula, but I'm fairly confident in this regard," said Aldrich. "Which means, simply put, I'm going to assign you with an undead unit capable of teleporting you when you need it."

"You got someone like that?" said V.

"I do." Aldrich clasped his hands together, causing green energy to shroud them. A magic circle appeared in front of him. The same complex circle that marked the summoning of the Mistknife and Adan.

Large, grasping tentacles poured out from the circle, and V yelped as she rolled backwards, dodging a tentacle from narrowly trying to grab her.

"Huhuhu, I always am amused by that reaction." A voice that oozed delight emanated from the circle. The green tentacles completely covered the circle, wriggling about in the cramped confines of the circle before stopping. "Ah, it appears I am stuck. O Lich, might you widen this portal?"

Aldrich sighed as he held his hand out, reaching his will out to interact with the mana comprising the magic circle. He expanded it, and out plopped a sizable floating sphere of grotesquely veiny green flesh. The tentacles were attached to the sphere, and it was obvious that the sphere was the creature's main body, and the tentacles were its limbs.

Each of the 12 tentacles ended in orb-like protrusions that housed glowing green eyeballs. Speaking of eyeballs, the creature's sphere body housed one giant eye with a toothy maw beneath, smiling with mischievous intent.

"Wh-what is that thing?" said V. "It looks like it came straight out of a h-anime! Not that I watch them!"

"Ooh, scared of these, are you?" The tentacle ball wriggled its tendrils out again, and V shrunk back further.

"Now you know how I feel when I see tentacles," sighed Valera.

"This is Balar, the Eyed," said Aldrich. "A high undead that's the best 'mage type' unit in my command"

[High Undead Limit: 3/5]

Balar turned around and bowed its floating sphere-eyeball body to Aldrich. "Good to see you again, my master. It has been long since you have called upon me."

"Good to see you too."

"And you, my lady." Balar eyed Valera, wriggling his tentacles.

"Don't even think about it," said Valera.

"You are no fun." Balar sighed. Despite his monstrous appearance, his huge eyeball and large, spike toothed mouth were actually very expressive. Almost cute, in a sort of oddly twisted way.

"Apologies, little lady." Balar turned his bowing body to V, making sure to respectfully bend his tentacles back and away. "I am simply amused by reactions like yours, hehehe."

"Wait, so what you're suggesting is that I stay with a giant, immature tentacle monster? 24/7?" said V, pointing accusingly at Balar.

"Excuse me? Immature? I am at the very least, five hundred years older than you, miss." Balar put two tentacles and crossed them in front of himself, just like how a human would cross their arms to show disapproval.

"That makes it worse. You're a perverted old man!" said V.

"Goodness, nobody can have a laugh nowadays," said Balar. "Humans, I tell you." He looked about, seeing the server room and the technology around him. "Hm...everything seems rather...unfamiliar. Uh, where are we?"

"V can explain that to you," said Aldrich, gesturing to V. "You're to guard her with your abilities. Do not get cocky, though, and focus on teleporting her away rather than fighting off threats in the case that they breach this area.

If anything can get here in the first place, they'll be a sizable threat I don't want to risk, and V is extremely important. I won't tolerate failure in this."

"I understand," said Balar. "I will have my [Teleportation Ray] ready, though I do have to figure out where to send this sweet little damsel to."

"You don't, uh, have anyone else?" said V.

"No, this is about as good as it gets," said Aldrich flatly. "Despite appearances and, well, personality, Balar is a powerful undead. Among the more powerful and versatile in my arsenal. His eyes can fire rays that range from disintegration to freezing to acid to, most importantly, teleportation.

He can also provide you buffs by staring at you."

"Expect me to stare at you for quite some time," said Balar, smiling.

"Great," groaned V. "But it's chill. As long as you respect my personal space, I'll respect yours."

"Of course," said Balar. He floated about, looking at the unfamiliar objects around him. "But must I stay confined here? I sense this is a new realm. I should like to explore."

"I can help with that." V tapped one of her cable hairs and projected a holographic screen in front of Balar.

"Ohh, what is this?" Balar poked at the screen, but his tentacle phased through it. "What sorcery is this? I do love gazing at and absorbing magic. Huhu, interesting...we will get along better than I thought."

Chapter 364: Feather's Meeting

"I'll leave you two together for some bonding time," said Aldrich, waving goodbye to V and Balar. "I've got several things to attend to."

"Yes, let us learn very thoroughly about each other," said Balar, smiling at V.

"Can I some pepper spray first?" said V. "Anti-eyeball spray? I'm not entirely comfortable around this guy." She sighed. "But fine, boss's orders, I guess."

She leered at Balar. More cable hairs grew from her head, twisting around each other to reinforce them while shifting the tips into blade-like protrusions. "No touching, got it?"

"Huhu, how scary. But it seems we are fellow tentacle enjoyers," Balar waved his tentacles in the air, mimicking V's hair movements. "So I foresee no issue."

"As long as you understand." V willed some of her cable hairs to latch back onto Desmond. "After hearing what Beta and Mel had to say, you know, I think I've figured out how to crack Desmond, too. He had hidden knowledge that I had no idea how to reach, but most likely, it's going to be details about the Scrapheart.

Once I break into that juicy vault, I'll let you know what's up."

Aldrich nodded and waved his hand, motioning for his units to follow him out.

30th floor of Haven Control Tower, the Research Room-

Aldrich and Valera sat around a metal table with Fler'Gan and Feather on the other side. Feather put his legs up on the table and crossed his arms.

"Stop that disrespect in front of the Elder." Fler'Gan swatted Feather's shoes, and Feather grumbled as he withdrew his legs and crossed them instead.

Atop Feather's head was a Mind Leech, sucking at the back his cranium like nothing was going on. Feather seemed unbothered by it, though.

"It's about time I have to get back to my duties," said Feather. "The boss is calling in a big meeting, some defcon 4 shit, and I can't miss it."

"You've already been away from some time," said Aldrich. "Are you sure nobody's missed you?"

"Hell yeah, people have missed me, I'm the life of the party after all!" Feather grinned. "But nah, I'm not needed in person as much as the other capos. I'm the 'Capo of Eyes', after all."

Aldrich nodded.

From Feather, Aldrich knew the basic organization of the Italian prong. It consisted of a boss at the top, then his consigliere, an assistant position that had almost as power as

the boss himself. Beneath that was the underboss, and then beneath that were eight capos.

The Italian prong was an evolution of the mafia in both Italy and the United States, merging together after the Altering to consolidate power. Their reach was thoroughly international, with their grubby hands dipped into various commercial interests and industries ranging from technology to construction.

They were the business smarts of the entire Trident operation.

Feather's role as the Capo of Eyes was to maintain a tight information network for the prong, specifically focusing on the United States, and he did that by running several bars all around the world that served as bases for informants and spies to report to. He also outsourced his information gathering, employing people like Desmond.

"Still, my position's not great," said Feather. "I can tell I'm starting to lose influence here. I ain't the only one managing information flow. They got Vito, the Capo of Ears, too, and we've always been in competition.

When I took my leave to hide out in my bunker, the boss saw that as an act of cowardice. It was a strategic retreat, mind you, but whatever. In any case, a lot of my responsibilities and networks have transferred over to Vito.

The next Capo meeting is coming up in a few days. If I miss that, I might get canned.

Fucking Vito, fat piece of shit, gobbling up cannoli by day and my territory by night."

"What do you know about prong operations in Blackwater?" said Aldrich.

"I know we're starting to ramp up our defenses. We're going wild on the spending for Mercs. We've tapped into Ember, the Nightriders, Bestiary, and Lagoon. There's going to be at least a dozen tough as nails A rankers there.

The knockout out of all of them, though, is Fafnir. You know him, right?"

"I do," said Aldrich.

"That sounds familiar," said Valera. "Like Fafelnir, the Dragon of Nightrack."

"You're on the right track with that, miss," said Feather. "I don't know what the hell a Nightrack is, but dragon is exactly what you'd describe Fafnir. Man's a goddamn beast in every sense of the word. And he's killed two S rankers to boot.

As far as mercenaries go, you're not getting anyone better than his tier."

"Right. That's...troublesome, to say the least," said Aldrich. "I can deal with A rankers now, but the likes of Fafnir and Solomon Solar, hm."

Fafnir was a German mercenary listed among the unofficial mercenary strength ranking system called the Killgrid. It calculated a mercenary's value based on how successful they were in completing difficult contracts.

Very similar to the AP system for the AA, but in many ways, much more straightforward. If someone was the top of the Killgrid, they were almost certainly there because they were the strongest. It was simply the nature of mercenary work.

There was no need to factor in things like PR or saving civilian lives. Whoever was strong enough to protect their client or kill their enemies got ranked higher.

As it so stood, Fafnir was rank 8 on the Killgrid. Previously, he had been rank 3, but he was an older Alter, and Crystallization had slowed him down.

But age was not a bad thing. Oftentimes, it meant more experience, and experience was just as deadly as raw power in many instances.

And even then, Fafnir was a force to be reckoned with. He was a Mutant Alter with draconic traits. Black scaled, wings, tail, claws and all. He could unleash a fiery breath that could easily melt the likes of Neo-Steel or create large-scale explosions, but the literal most toughest part about him were his scales.

His scales had a force reflective property that made Fafnir near impossible to take down. He had a healing factor on top of that, so the only reliable way to beat Fafnir was to find some way to attack his internal organs or fight him until his energy reserves drained out.

Now that Fafnir was old, reaching 80, his energy reserves were not what they used to be, but even then, he could probably fight at strength for a few hours at the very least.

"I'll put the issue of dealing with Fafnir off for a bit. I wanted to ask, can you get a hold of Mad Jack?" said Aldrich.

Feather shook his head. "Nah. Mad Jack's a fucking nutter. Can't control him at all. Well, not me, at least. Only the boss can."

The boss. An enigmatic man that had almost no information available about him either in the public or the underworld.

"And can you get a hold of the boss?" said Aldrich. He wanted to see just how far Feather's authority could reach.

Aldrich could not do much about the Japanese prong as he had no connections with them, but he could, using Feather, initiate a strategy to severely weaken or sow discord in the Italian prong. That would knock out quite a bit of the defenses on Blackwater when the time to attack came.

"No shot with that either," said Feather. "The boss takes it safe and easy, just like every boss before him. Makes us capos work like hogs in the mud, though, I'll tell you that."

"What about below that? Underboss? Consigliere?"

"Underboss? Possible. But hard." Feather rubbed his temple in annoyance. "Fuck, I have to attend a capo meeting in a couple days, and the underboss is going to grill my ass. If I don't show up with decent info from Desmond, which I won't, because Desmond's a recycled tin can by now, I'm going to be shit out of luck."

"How many days?"

"Three," said Feather.

Aldrich and Valera both exchanged knowing glances. All the capos and the underboss, located together in one single meeting? A chance like this did not present itself often, if at all.

"Now, I know what you two are thinking, a good chance to whack em all, right?" said Feather. "But don't count on it. The Underboss is only going to be there through a screen. And not all of us capos are gonna be there either."

The three War Capos are at Blackwater, and they'll stay there to manage military ops. "

"Five out of eight capos doesn't sound bad, does it?" said Aldrich.

"No. No it does not," said Valera, smiling in glee.

Chapter 365: Raid Plans

"You guys, I know this whole killing everyone in a meeting things sounds great, totally godfather style, but it isn't going to slow down the prong as much as you think," said Feather. "The five capos there are going to be shield capos, and they're about as replaceable as a Neo-York outskirts hooker."

"Shield capos?" Aldrich asked.

"Shield capos deal with commerce. Business. Spying. Non-combat stuff," said Feather. "The three sword capos are who you want to get. They manage forces. And they're less replaceable, getting their positions because they're tough on top of being strategic."

Meanwhile to be a shield capo, you just gotta be a good snake, tell lies, want credits, and sure, yeah, that's a skill in its own right, but it's a hell of a lot easier to be a good liar than it is a good fighter. Take it from me, damn it, I can't fight for shit, but I can survive and get around.

But I'd never, ever dream of being a sword capo. Those guys are tough as nails, goddamn, they'd even punch a hole in whatever hammer that came down on em'. Me, I prefer not getting hammered at all. Not into that kind of stuff."

"Regardless, taking out every shield capo should cause plenty of chaos, no?" said Aldrich.

"Indeed. Five out of eight heads of a hydra severed is a tremendous problem for the beast, even if they grow their maws back," said Valera. "It still leaves them weak in the time it takes to heal."

"Right, but shield capos manage massive crews. Basically businesses. They have a lot of people that can take up their leadership when they take a hit. You'd slow them down, but you wouldn't put a dent in them.

And shield doesn't control sword and vice versa. It's the boss that wields both, and he's made it clear he isn't going to have the sword capos or their forces budge." Feather put a knuckle to his forehead in thought. "At best, you'll cut off credit flow and stall contracts, stop more mercs from getting enlisted, but the good ones, the top notch ones, they've already been hired.

Not to mention the Seven Swords, those guys are fucking beasts.

Point is, taking out the shield won't make the sword fall. They're two different mechanisms. There's a little overlap, but not enough to make it matter."

"I see," said Aldrich. "But you know, that's quite alright. Go to that meeting. You'll still damage the Trident's financials overall. You see, Feather, my short term goal might be to stage an attack on Blackwater, but my long term one is a little more ambitious, that is, when it comes to the Trident."

"Yeah?" Feather raised a brow.

"I'm thinking it's about time the Trident comes under new leadership. It's the least they owe me after what they've taken." Aldrich stood up, nodding, sensing he was done here.

Monday, November 21st, 2117, 6 days before the Blackwater Attack -

"And with this, my soul shall be secure?" Casimir cocked his head as he stared quite non-chalantly at the ethereal chain extending from his chest to Adan's hook.

Casimir, Aldrich, and the nomad chiefs Clint and Gerard were seated at the counter of a bar. The bar was emptied out and the bartender was Cubehead, Casimir's warp Alter and one of his high end personnel.

"It's a contingency," said Aldrich. "If you die, your soul comes back to Adan who guards it for safekeeping. I can then resurrect you again in a new body, potentially."

"Ah, the fabled cycle of reincarnation. Quite interesting." Casimir nodded with interest. "To think your powers have dominion over it. Marvelous, no? You two are not interested?"

Clint and Gerard both shook their heads.

"Nah. I don't want any second chances. If I die, I die," said Clint.

"I'd like my soul to be free when it leaves my body," said Gerard.

"Tch. The way you run around, old man, you'll never run into a fight to knock that wrinkled soul out of ya in the first place," said Clint.

"I am not a fighter, not anymore. And I'd like to live the rest of my years in peace, without criticism, mind you."

"Well, good thing is, I'm not asking you to fight," said Aldrich.

Gerard sighed in relief. "Alright then, why did you need me."

"Your tribe, the Hawks, they're the best Wasteland mappers on this side of the country, right?"

"Damn right." Gerard smiled proudly.

"I'll let Casimir explain, then." Aldrich nodded to Casimir.

Casimir swirled his wineglass, looking at the dark red liquid forming a circular, rhythmic current. "My dear secretary Blanca and I were poring over the information we salvaged from the Red Circle. Most of it blackmail that is now useless, targeted at Haven officials to keep us in business, but some of it was more important.

Related to the Trident with whom we had business relations with."

"Still can't get over that," said Clint, taking a swig of whiskey not from a shot glass, but a whole beer mug.

"I assure you, Clint, my enterprises have had no overlap with the untimely end of your wife and child. That was orchestrated solely by the Japanese prong after you took down three of the Seven Swords."

"Cowards, all of em'. Call themselves cool shit like the seven swords, but once they find somebody they can't kill, they gotta resort to killing others. Fuck em." Clint sighed, regaining his composure. "Sorry about that. Wife wouldn't me to be like that, bitter. I'll listen properly, promise."

Casimir continued. "I understand the weight of your loss, Mr. Spearhorn, and what I present to you today is a chance to strike back at it. Have you all heard of Meteor Labs?"

"Yeah," said Clint. "We used to do some runs for em'. Mostly contraband. Or sometimes heists."

Gerard nodded too. "They were one of the better paying clients that hired us nomads, though about fifteen years ago, give or take, they stopped hiring anyone."

"Meteor Labs has been in a covert collaboration with the Trident. To be precise, not simply the Trident, but the entirety of the Dark Six," said Casimir. "They, in the public sphere, are a lesser known biotechnology company that sits under the umbrella of Paladis, tier 1 company that stands near the top in the U.S. when it comes to medical technology and research.

With Paladis, being, coincidentally, quite a lucrative business partner with the Italian Prong. In fact, if you go back far enough, you will see that Paladis was founded by a splinter of one of three great families that formed the Italian Prong."

"All the companies are choking in criminal shit at worst, knee deep in it at best," said Gerard. He was getting a little antsy, worried that this conversation would lead to a huge demand from him and, considering his risk averse nature, that was probably the last thing he wanted. "Just how it is. But where's this leading? What's the point?"

"Simply giving context," said Casimir, mildly annoyed. He did not like being rushed while explaining things. He liked when people wanted to get to the point when it was done with confidence and poise, but when it was carried with anxiety, it bothered him.

"But I suppose I will waltz over the fine details to the core of it all like some bull stampeding about a china shop.

Meteor Labs synthesized Kryptic for the Italian prong, as well as a unique drug called Boost that causes temporary proliferation of Alter Cell count, among many other

valuable experiments. We have reason to even believe they are capable of inducing additional powers into Alters, if Ace, one of the Blackwater students working for us, is to be believed.

There is good reason to believe that Meteor Labs, in their main offsite research facility, has additional reserves of Kryptic."

"I get where this is going. A good old raid. You want the Kryptic. But what for? Thinking of assassinating Solar or something?" said Clint. "Or I guess any Alter that relies on storing external energy for their powers. Just Solar's the biggest name out there with 'reactor' type powers that Kryptic absolutely rawdogs over."

"That is precisely what I am thinking of doing," said Aldrich.

"Shit. Here I thought I was joking." Clint nodded to himself. Neither of the chiefs knew Solomon Solar was compromised as it was a very well hidden secret.

Gerard scratched his lengthy white beard. "I don't know. Targeting a S-class hero? That's going to make waves. The risk associated with the move is going to be massive. What even for?"

"Solomon Solar is on the Italian Prong's payroll," said Aldrich. "We don't know exactly how it started, but it's been that way for ten years at the very least. Probably more. He's the Trident's biggest and best mole.

He's the reason why the Trident knows exactly when and where the AA is moving. And in exchange, the Trident sets up conflicts that let Solomon Solar farm AP with max efficiency."

"Always figured that sunshine blockhead had some dirt on him," said Clint with a snort. "Guys like him, perfect outward image, always smiling like some horror freakshow, they're the worst when you dig deep down."

"I get it," said Gerard. "If you want to make an attack on Blackwater, one of the Trident's big gems, you'll have to deal with their big guns too."

"The biggest being Solomon Solar," said Aldrich.

Chapter 366: Clint's Decision

"Solar? Sorry, Thanatos, but if that's what you're pitting me against, I can't do much," said Gerard. He grimaced, tapping nervously at his glass of beer with enough force to send the cold perspiring water flinging off to the wooden counter.

"I know better than to expect a fight from you. Plus, I'm not in favor of overworking senior citizens either," said Aldrich. "What I need you two for is the raid on Meteor Labs.

You, Gerard, I specifically need to track the lab down give me a good read of the area. Basic reconnaissance."

Gerard and his riders, the Hawks, were specialized in navigating the Wastelands by reading geostorms. The Wastelands were an ever shifting, ever dangerous zone where geostorms of any nature showed up in frightening frequency, and knowing when they did was invaluable information.

The issue was that geostorms messed with both technology and Alters tremendously. Even the toughest Alters would struggle to survive in these storms, not because they posed a physical threat to them, but because they would overload from energy - the power resource that Alter Organs and cells generated to fuel their abilities - explosively building up within them.

Any attempt to predict geostorms based off of technology like satellite surveillance failed due to their optical shielding.

And direct observation using drones or bots was laughable as storms frequently short circuited any technology that was not nomad engineered, regardless of how impressive it was.

Only two types of technology worked in geostorms.

One, created by Ravana, sentinel of India. His flying fortress, called Pushpaka, could travel anywhere, shielded using some otherworldly power.

Second was nomad tech. Its cobbled together proportions that seemingly should not work by any known realistic law of physics all originated from Arskman, a world class mechanic who was around since the Altering.

Arksman was considered the 'first nomad'. A free spirited revolutionary who wanted to destroy all corporations. When he saw that the Panopticon would integrate corporations into their world order, he decided to leave to the wastelands, creating a moving city of his own, a sort of Noah's ark that began the nomad movement.

That old city, called Arktown, was last seen forty years ago and never again. Neither was Arksman.

But his greatest innovation, the Ark Engine, lived on with the nomads, and only they could reliably power it using pure etherite from chasing geostorms.

Using nomad-tech bikes and ether dampening cloaks, the Hawks, over decades of careful observation under Gerard's eagle eye, mapped out a relatively accurate pattern

of geostorm movement across the east coast of the United States, and that knowledge alone made the Hawks the most valuable, at least credit wise, among all of the great nomad tribes.

Companies would easily be willing to kill to obtain that information.

"I'd like your riders to provide me with timeframes Alter forces can easily access the lab's area for a sustained attack, though optimally, any raid shouldn't last more than an hour or two."

Gerard sighed in relief. "I can do that. So long as I don't gotta commit any of my boys to the line of fire."

"And you want me and my riders to be the muscle to break the labs down, right?" said Clint.

"You and a select group of other personnel from me," said Aldrich. "Including Alan."

"Oh, that kid." Clint scratched his head. "You sure? He's got guts, yeah, and his cybernetics ain't half-bad, but if he's anyone special to ya, it'd be pretty damn dangerous."

Meteor Labs is a pretty big name in the Underworld. Any of their offsite bases are gonna be packed to the tits with guards."

"He wants to fight. I won't deny him that," said Aldrich. "Also, Clint, preferably, I don't want you going to that raid by yourself. Send Diamondback and some of your riders instead. The force I'm gathering should be enough to overpower the lab's defenses."

"I don't like sending my boys out without fighting by their side," said Clint. "My pa always said a real man don't tell his friends to fight without being by their side."

"I know, but I need you in top condition," said Aldrich. "The Seven Swords are going to be at Blackwater. A week from now, when I plan on attacking."

Clint paused. His ever present grin faded almost in a flash. Aldrich expected to see anger on his face. The Seven Swords were responsible for killing Clint's wife and child, after all, but instead, Clint looked more somber than anything else.

"Seven Swords, huh? Leadership hasn't changed, I figure? Monk's still the first blade?" said Clint.

Aldrich nodded. "Same leadership."

The mood in the bar grew significantly more serious.

"I'm not here to push you around," said Gerard. "But the Swords ain't pushovers. Not even you, the Unbreakable, could take em all on before. Especially Monk.

But it isn't just that.

I know it's not my place to say this, I wasn't the one that lost her, but Lily, she wouldn't want you to put your life on the line for the sake of her memory."

"Yeah. You're right." Clint leaned back in his chair, one made bigger specifically for larger bodied Mutants, but it still creaked against his weight and size. He looked up, closing his eyes, thinking in silence.

That silence spoke loud to Aldrich. Clint was, alongside Dracul, undoubtedly the strongest ally that Aldrich had.

Dracul had agreed to help Aldrich only in eliminating the Italian prong as they had been privy to the Russian prong's attempt to kill Dracul. The Russian prong had attempted to get rid of Dracul by blowing up his home using a specially made bomb designed to eradicate all of Dracul's shadow mass in an instant.

The Italian prong had supplied the bomb to begin with.

However, Dracul did not extend his help in dealing with the Japanese prong. The Japanese prong had nothing to do with those plans. On top of that, Dracul and the Seven Swords had a tacit agreement not to fight each other after they once fought to a standstill where both sides agreed to withdraw in respect after their respective clients were assassinated.

Clint, however, had a personal vendetta against the Japanese prong, specifically the Seven Swords, undoubtedly the toughest group at Blackwater.

Their leader, Monk, was also significantly stronger than even Fafnir.

Monk was not on the Killgrid. None of the Seven Swords were, but that was because they were not really a mercenary force that wanted to advertise their strength for hire. They were a professional standing army of sorts that fought solely and loyally for the Japanese prong.

However, talk around the mercenary community was that if Monk became freelance, he would be top 3.

Monk's ability was not well understood because of how fast he killed his enemies, but images after his warpaths showed buildings, structures, and people cut apart with precise slices, regardless of how tough the material or Alter was.

It appeared that not even Clint could take on Monk by himself. But with additional support, it was very possible.

The issue was that Clint needed to accept the mission. Aldrich had brought up Clint's dead wife and child to light a fire of vengeance within him, but Gerard's words seemed to be swaying Clint away.

"Yeah. If Lily was alive, she wouldn't want me to go," said Clint. He opened his eyes and set his gaze back down on his drink. "But if she was alive, I'd have retired from this life wholesale, most likely, and given Diamondback the reigns.

But she ain't alive."

Clint roughly grabbed his mug and downed the entire glass of hard liquor before slamming it down on the counter, shattering it. Cubehead, without breaking stride at all, started to sweep the glass shards down a bin.

"I've learned to let go of a lot of the hate over the years," said Clint. "Learned to smile again. But I wouldn't be no goddamn man if I didn't settle a score like that. A score that took my wife and son from me."

Clint nodded to Aldrich. "I'm in, Thanatos. Ready as ever for my round two with the Seven Swords."

Meanwhile in the Vimana, Aarav Singh's personal aircraft-

Aarav sat back in the fully reclining, plush cushioned seat of his private jet, legs crossed as he took a long drag on his cigarette. He looked at a holographic screen in front of him, reading an article titled: 'Sheshanaga's Immortality Quest Heats Up: Arjun in the Lead?'

'Not for long,' thought Aarav as he flicked the article away after scanning it for a quick second. He thought about his father's assassination attempt, at the almost fantastical aid he had received from Thanatos, and chuckled to himself. 'Magic, huh? Never thought I'd see the likes of it.

But there's always something new to discover in this broken world of ours. Alien tech, and now, magic.

The more it breaks, it seems, the more novelty comes crawling out the cracks.'

Aarav knew from his eye that the thread of his life always ended at a specific point. It did not matter what circumstances he changed about himself to try and extend his life.

Whether he hid in a bunker, decided never to go out, hired the best security detail, it ended at the same point everytime.

He could shorten his thread by pursuing reckless actions, but he could never lengthen it past that wall.

Perhaps it was a wild theory, but he believed the world would end there.

It was why, after getting this eye, he started to look big. To hunt for the most power he could. That was why his eye was now on Sheshanaga, a massive treasure trove of resources decaying under the greedy dragon that was his father.

It was only by allying with Thanatos that the thread lengthened, but that did not mean he could stay complacent.

Aarav tapped at his screen, wondering what to do next about Haven and Thanatos. He was heavily interested in entering a R and D partnership with them, especially in regards to making magic a more easily accessible resource, combining it with biotechnology and cybernetics.

'I'll send Sita over to them to establish a team. They have potential, but they're lacking personnel. And she's the only mad genius I would trust to work with something as crazy as magic,' thought Aarav.

As he thought this, a coat hanging from a handle behind him morphed into the shape of a blue shaded humanoid, looking almost like an animated mannequin.

The being silently dropped to the ground and stood up, raising a hand in the air behind Aarav, a hand that morphed into a blade-like protrusion.

Chapter 367: Assassination

The blue humanoid thrust his bladed hand down with the practiced ease of someone who had done this, taking lives, a thousand plus times over. His movements were wordless, soundless, efficient. The very texture of his skin was altered so that even the faintest breeze would not draw a noise. His feet had glided across the metal floor like he was sliding, preventing any footsteps from echoing out.

He was a trained assassin called Blueshift, quite competent in his job as he could easily shift into objects that were blue, though he only mimicked physical dimensions, not any special properties.

But he was not the only trained assassin in the confines of that jet.

The humanoid's face, like its body, was similarly nearly featureless, sporting indents for the eyes and the mouth, making it hard to read any expression on it, but even then, his

surprise was palpable, evidenced by the faint impressions of his 'eyes' growing slightly wider.

Before the hand-blade sunk into Aarav's neck, it was stopped. Not by some kind of barrier, but judging by the pressure, it came from the grip of an invisible hand wound tightly around his wrist. A chillingly cold hand that seemed to sap the warmth right from his veins.

This was bad. Terribly bad.

Blueshift had not expected Aarav to be with anyone here. Aarav's trip to Haven was supposed to have been made in top secret. This private jet was stealth grade for that exact reason. And whenever Aarav went on secretive trips, he always tended to go alone or with just one or two of his most trusted guards.

However, neither of his usual guards were around. And even if they were, Transposition and Sugar, Aarav's two usual guards, did not have any invisibility to speak of.

That had given Blueshift the confidence to sneak into the jet, replace Aarav's coat, and wait to kill him when he returned. He had been waiting here over twenty four hours for this exact moment.

The plan had felt completely airtight, impossible to fail. He had snuck in from far outside of the city too, posing as a Haven bound nomad's wallet so as to prevent Thanatos's forces from ever scouting him out.

So how?

No, the how did not matter.

What mattered now was that Blueshift got out.

Or-

Blueshift briefly glanced at Aarav. Aarav was still staring at his screen, oblivious to Blueshift. It would take a fraction of a second more for him to notice.

A fraction of a second to take him out again, before the owner of this hand responded.

Blueshift was not the fastest or strongest Alter out there, but his AC count was still comparable with lower end A rankers in the AA. Still superhuman.

He had little time to use his free arm, to waste time winding it back and thrusting it forwards, but -

Blueshift's forward arm, the one mere inches away already from the back of Aarav's head, shifted again, the blade tip rippling as he willed a spike to grow out and breach the small gap left between his hand and Aarav's defenseless brain.

"AHHH!" Blueshift stumbled backwards, falling to one knee, breathing heavy as he put a hand to the stump that was once his right arm.

Red blood sputtered out from his severed stump, pattering with dull impact on the metal flooring. Reactively, he shifted his arm, sealing it shut so that he would not look his lifeblood and to dull the pain by numbing the nerves.

That prevented him from going into shock.

"I'm not the type to entertain guests," said Aarav, puffing out a breath of smoke. He leaned down and pressed a button under his seat. "Especially uninvited ones. They don't call me the CEO recluse for nothing."

The innards of the jet flashed blue. Blueshift's breath caught in his throat as an electrical charge rocked through him from the ground, preventing him from shapeshifting again.

"But, in a way, I guess you're not uninvited if I didn't expect you. Isn't that right, Blueshift?" Aarav stood up, straightened his tie, adjusted his shades, and turned around. He walked straight up to Blueshift, looking down at the assassin as electricity crackled in waves through his body.

"No response? No, a good electric shock would make anyone a little shy with their words. In your case, it also handily prevent you from shifting for another hour. I'll go ahead and let you catch your breath." Aarav took another drag from his cigarette before he snuffed it out on Blueshift's bald blue head.

The cigarette hissed as it burned out, scattering ashes down Blueshift's head and face.

"H-how...?" managed out Blueshift.

"Oh, you can talk already? Perks of having a high AC count, I guess. I'm quite jealous. My friend here...", Aarav looked around but could not find who he was looking for.

A visible hand settled on his shoulder. Though clad in dark green metals from a gauntlet, the armor was thin enough to notice that the hand was small and slender, belonging to a woman.

Aarav sighed, barely maintaining his cool at the sudden surprise touch. "Do you always have to show up like that?"

"..." In a puff of green mist, the rest of the Mistknife became visible. She stepped ahead of Aarav, standing between him and Blueshift.

She was noticeably large, and even while she had a hunched over posture, one closer to the ground like a stalking, prowling panther, she seemed obviously taller than either Aarav or Blueshift.

If she stood up straight, she would probably have reached seven feet (213 cm). Her cloak of mist floated around her, carried by invisible wind, and wherever it passed by, it veiled her appearance, blurring and making it almost completely transparent.

"Anyway, this is who took your arm out," said Aarav. "She doesn't have a name, but that makes her unique, no? In this day and age and world where every street shitter out there needs to have some kind of superhero or supervillain name, something about being nameless has its own charm."

Blueshift stared up at the Mistknife, dumbfounded. "An...an assassin? From which group!? How did I not notice you!?"

"..." The Mistknife raised her curved, jagged dagger of glowing emerald in the air.

Blueshift shrank back, putting his arm out to plead for his life. "Wait! Wait! I can give you information! About who sent me!"

Aarav chuckled. He was about to light another cigarette, but amused as he was, he flicked it to Blueshift where it bounced off the Alter's face.

"It isn't often that comedy works on me. Go on, tell me another joke," said Aarav. Blueshift just stared at Aarav in confusion.

"Oh, you weren't joking?" Aarav shrugged. "So much for that standup routine. I digress. You seem to think I wasn't aware that you weren't my good old brother Arjun's top dog for his corporate killings.

I mean, props to him, he did conceal your presence fairly well. He even faked your death so nobody would suspect you anymore.

But Arjun is drunk on his delusions if he thinks that I wouldn't see through that. I knew you would come from me someday, and, hats off to you, my good fellow, you ARE good at your job.

It would be worrying if you came from me without me knowing.

Why do you think I left my jet so defenseless? Why I let information about my trip to Haven leak to your brother? I knew my brother wouldn't pass up this chance to get rid of me, the illegitimate shadow in the family and thorn in everyone's asses.

I could eliminate the confounding variables and control when and where you showed up.

Though, I do have to say, without the lady here, things would have been a little harder to make things work. You assassin types always get flighty when there's a security detail.

Too bad you didn't see her coming."

"I scanned the ship!" protested Blueshift. "The entire area! I couldn't detect any cloaking or stealth!" Blueshift had succeeded in hundreds of assassinations. He had failed just once before. He knew he was going to die here, but he had to know how he had died, if only for his pride. "How!?"

"What's the point of magic if you know how the trick's done?" Aarav pointed at Blueshift, and the metal panels beneath him lit up blue, sending another paralyzing shock.

"I have to thank you for that." Aarav nodded to the Mistknife. "I knew you wouldn't fail. My life thread did not end here. But seeing it happen was still quite the spectacle.

I don't know if you understand what I'm saying, but if there's anything you want, I can provide it. Within reason, of course."

"..." The Mistknife reached into her cloak and unrolled a small, tattered poster showing cotton candy on a stick. She pointed her knife at the candy.

"Ah, that? I can make that happen. Definitely within reason. Within much more reason than I thought." Aarav nodded.

The Mistknife rolled the poster back and faded away into invisibility.

"Now then, Blueshift, what to do with you? We could take a jolly trip together to Mumbai and have you go through a few rounds of persuasive questioning. But, unfortunately, I'm quite confident I can read my brother without external help," said Aarav. "Though I can't very well have you waltz free, and I'm in no need of an assassin when I have a better one."

Aarav walked past Blueshift, towards the cockpit of the Vimana. "You know what, though. I do remember, Thanatos is in need of an Alter capable of shifting. For R and D purposes, I hear. You should be the perfect candidate to help out with that."

Aarav spoke to the cockpit, though there was nobody there, running on autopilot as it was. "Sattva, redirect course to Haven.

"Yes sir," said a woman's voice, neutral in its inflection in a typically A.I. fashion.

Aarav clapped for Blueshift. "I've always looked up to those who gave up their lives and bodies for science. So take this sign of my respect with you to the grave. Or, I suppose if I'm being more accurate, the operating table."

Chapter 368: Healing Procedure

Tuesday, November 22nd, 5 days before the Blackwater Attack

12:00 P.M.

"I'd like to extend my appreciation for you helping with this excavation," said Aldrich. He stood in front of his control tower, watching as huge, construction-orange colored vehicles ripped apart all the concrete and asphalt, baring a large semi-circle of fresh dirt.

The sound of enormous mech claws and drills cracking apart and pulling up street material echoed loudly through the air, the cacophony of construction accompanied by rising clouds of debris and dust.

The uncovered dirt merged with Central Haven Park up ahead.

'I must say, there are many things in this new realm that amaze me, but this...this is rather unpleasant,' said Valera telepathically, grimacing as her pointed ears twitched at the harsh noises. She stood at guard beside Aldrich, though she was not in her armor, just a casual shirt and jeans combo. 'It is like dwarven mining. But a thousand times worse. And I already hated the din of dwarven golems.'

'I figured you wouldn't like this, but just bear with me for a bit,' said Aldrich. 'It'll be bad manners if I wasn't on-site.'

"It's a good thing you got a park up ahead. Means we got less sewage and pipelines to bust through." Bart, CEO of Hammerhead Industries, spoke to Aldrich through a holographic screen projected by a drone buzzing above his head.

"The surrounding area is uninhabited, so feel free to uproot at will," said Aldrich. He nodded, pleased at this development. The excavation was for the eventual planting of the Arsellis Treeseed which, soon, Arcadia would nurture into full growth.

He wanted to do this soon, if possible. The Arsellis Treeseed, once nurtured, would provide a city-wide barrier that could prevent demonic possession or any form of non-physical intrusion. The benefits to this were glaringly obvious considering Aldrich had made an enemy of an Archdemon in the form of Ikon.

This meant that Aldrich had to keep Arcadia here to grow the seed, preventing her from aiding with the Blackwater attack. On top of that, Okeanos had to stay here too so that he could power the city.

Two top tier heavy hitters gone.

That did leave a bad taste in Aldrich's mouth, but he had some ways to compensate. The fourth trial quest, in particular, would prove to be very useful...

"I'll relay it to the supervisor on site there." Bart's eyes turned hopeful, his jaws opening slightly to reveal his thick, bright pink gums and the many rows of teeth arming them. "About my daughter..."

Bart's voice trailed off, unsure how to proceed.

"It's possible," said Aldrich.

Bart sighed, closing his eyes, deeply relieved. He adjusted his giant suit and tie to maintain professionalism.

"Thanks," said Bart.

Aldrich had gotten Bart's file on his daughter's condition on Monday night, and he had thoroughly reviewed it with Fler'Gan and Eric, Blackwater's medic.

Hammerhead's daughter, Filia, as she was called, inherited some portion of her father's mutant genes. Her mother, however, had not been a mutant at all, and the resulting birth had been difficult, as was most often the case with mutant and non mutant couplings.

At birth, Filia seemed almost completely human and healthy. She had a few rough patches of denticle skin here and there, but that was it. Her childhood development was also fairly normal, roughly comparable to that of a normal human female.

That was until she hit ten years old.

When she hit puberty and her Alter Organ bloomed, becoming more active in producing Alter Cells, the problems showed up.

She manifested more shark-like traits from her father.

Sharp teeth, electro-sensitive receptors, more rough, armor-like shark skin, additional muscle mass, a tail, fins - but these were not the issue. In fact, they were strictly benefits, all things considered.

The issue were the gills.

When Filia manifested gills, her circulatory system underwent a complete collapse as her body was unable to reconcile two conflicting breathing systems together. This rendered her unable to process oxygen properly anymore.

Her lungs failed, no longer capable of taking in oxygen from the air, and her gills did not form properly, failing to take oxygen from water.

This left her completely on life support, hooked up on a constant, complicated oxygen supply.

It got worse from there.

An accident when she was fifteen, likely a targeted attack, had temporarily disabled her oxygen support system, and though it was hastily restored within minutes, the damage had been done. The brain was a fragile thing. Just a few minutes without oxygen could do untold amounts of harm to it.

That left her in a permanent coma, unable to move at all. She was essentially a statue, incapable of responding to anyone or anything.

Brain scans did show activity, though, and that was what Bart banked on for the past three years, hoping and waiting for something to cure her.

"I have to warn you again," said Aldrich. "You do understand what my healing procedure entails, correct?"

Bart nodded. "I do. No matter what, it's better than how she is now. It's a terrible thing for a parent to say, but more than a few times, I thought it would've been kinder to her to have cut her life support off.

Trapped in that body, in that prison of permanent sleep, she must have gone through so many hells. But I made her stay in it, all to hope that one day I'd find a way to wake her up.

Damn it..." A tear welled up in Bart's wide, ever open shark eye. "I just hope if she wakes up, she'll forgive me. Understand me."

"The brain scans aren't conclusive as to whether she was conscious or not," said Aldrich. "It's entirely possible she'll wake up like it was just a dream. Something that passed in an instant."

"I hope to god that's true," said Bart. He shook his head. "I'm getting emotional again. Ain't right for me to keep talking like this."

"We can hash the details out with our technos," said Aldrich. "You know my price. And I know how much you value your daughter. Am I right to say that this is a fair result for both of us?"

What Aldrich asked for was for Hammerhead Industries to eventually become an official partner for Haven. Before the official partnership, Hammerhead Industries would essentially do whatever Aldrich wanted it to.

Within reason, of course. 60% of construction costs would be shouldered by Hammerhead itself as an investment. The remaining 40% would be subsidized by credit backed by Aarav's name.

Bart would greenlight several additional construction projects. At the moment, without an official partnership, all he could do was restore basic amenities like a functional sewage system, plumbing, an electric grid, net connectivity, and so on.

But afterwards, Bart had promised thorough construction across the entirety of the city, repairing most of the damage done to the city from the Locus Raids.

The official partnership, however, could not happen immediately.

Not yet, the U.S. government still had too much leverage to tank Hammerhead Industries if they got a whiff of the company being too close with Haven, but after, when Aldrich got more established to minimize the risk, things would change.

That would happen after Aldrich got the Scrapheart.

And after Aarav Singh killed his father and took over Sheshanaga.

Coincidentally, both of those missions would take place on the exact same day.

Sunday.

Once Aldrich had the Scrapheart, he would be a global military power without question. Once Aarav had Sheshanaga, Aldrich could have an official Fortune Company backing him. It would be an alliance of tremendous influence that no single country, not even the U.S., could challenge.

"The price is mighty steep. But it's worth it," said Bart. "Though I want you to come to me for the procedure. I don't want to risk sending Filia out anywhere."

"I understand. Invite Seismic over for dinner tonight. I'll join in." Aldrich nodded and double tapped the screen, closing it.

"Can we leave now?" Valera complained, her ears still twitching. "If we do have our date, I truly do not wish it to be anywhere near these building golems."

"Noted," said Aldrich. He looked up at the sky. Where his next meeting was. "I'd like you to armor up for now, Valera."

"Understood, master." Valera's tone instantly grew serious as she clenched her fists, her hound armor materializing around her in a shower of black and red sparks.

Aldrich then pressed at the ear of his helm, activating his communicator. "Channel: Dracul."

After a small wait of static noise, Dracul connected on the other end.

"What is it?" said Dracul.

"I know you're more of a night worker, but I wanted to know if you're up to provide some insurance," said Aldrich. "Like last time."

"Ah. The AA getting in the way again? As they usually do?" said Dracul.

"Not in the way. But I don't want to take risks," said Aldrich.

"I will be there," said Dracul.

Chapter 369: Preparing for the AA

Aldrich's next stop was the Panopticon. V had received correspondence from Emrys, president of the AA, that they now requested Aldrich's presence.

The Halo Carrier was in low orbit situated approximately a hundred miles outside of Haven where, at a designated meeting site, Aldrich would be escorted to the carrier, then to the Panopticon itself.

It was part of the deal Aldrich had struck with Emrys. In exchange for cooperating with the Vanguard heir search and receiving all rights to the successor's power, Aldrich would help the Panopticon enhance its defensive capability against demonic possession.

Emrys had assured that the trip to the Panopticon would be done via warp, thus it would not take long at all, leaving Aldrich time to join Bart and heal his dinner at late evening.

This was Aldrich's most important meeting. It gave him access to Vanguard's journal. And it gave him access to the Panopticon's inner workings. He had a tentative working relationship with the AA and Panopticon for now, but if he could see more of how they functioned, he could determine better whether he could support them more or not.

To accompany him to the meeting, Aldrich took Valera, his most trusted guard, Dracul for raw power, and Fler'Gan and V for their knowledge. Within his Phylactery, Aldrich kept Chrysa for her warp capabilities.

Aldrich had told his group to meet up with him atop one of Haven's walls. So far, it was just Aldrich, Valera, and Dracul. V and Fler'Gan would come by with Chrysa after prepping Haven for their exit. V especially needed time to boost cyberspace security due to her absence.

"Six days." Dracul spoke softly, more to himself than anyone present, staring off into the barren distance.

"Are you ready?" asked Aldrich.

"I have been ready for twenty five years," said Dracul. "We will be one step closer to wiping out the scourge of the Valentino family."

The Valentino family was the head of the Italian prong. Underneath them were the D'angelo and Accardo. There were more families besides them as well, but those were minor in comparison.

The Italian prong was a strong 'core' of three families with revolving, replaceable 'gears' surrounding it formed by more minor crime groups. This made their operations, as Feather pointed out, highly widespread as they had manpower all across the world to work with.

"I wasn't questioning your resolve," said Aldrich. "That much, I already know is a given. It's about the potential contingencies they have for you."

"I know. I read your report," said Dracul.

Aldrich had received additional information about Mel as to how Dracul was sealed by A.I.I. in the future. When A.I.I. took control of the Scrapheart and made its identity public, Dracul was the first to strike against them.

Dracul did it alone, so there were few concrete details as to how his one man mission went. What Mel did know was how it ended. It was an anomalous object stolen from the Irregulars Department codenamed the 'Eliminator'.

It was a spherical projectile that, when simulated with sufficient energy charge, activated, creating a vortex of spatial distortions that could target specific individual targets, devouring them until there was nothing left.

The origins of the technology were unknown, but it was most certainly extraterrestrial, sourced from the Unraveling.

"I hear that your strength is tremendous," said Valera. "I respect power. But power must be reliable for it to be true."

"One of my men used to say something similar," said Dracul, closing his eyes in remembrance. "But do not worry yourselves. I can see how such an object may be dangerous to me. I tend to spread my darkness across vast swathes, and your report states that the object locks on to targets even with minor exposure.

So long as I keep my darkness contained, I will face no real threat from such a slow moving mechanism."

"I understand that the Italian prong also has tech that's meant to counter you. The Lightbomb-," began Aldrich before he was cut off by bladed tendrils of darkness rising around him.

Aldrich's magical energy raged around him in threatening display. Valera manifested her shield and pointed it at Dracul, the hellfire rippling from her bulwark's maw.

"Do not mention that name again," said Dracul, surprisingly calmly. He withdrew his darkness. "My apologies. I try to remain calm. But some words, some things, they rip reaction from me before my cooler mind can prevail."

"I see," said Aldrich, his energy aura simmering down as the darkness faded away. Dracul, it seemed, suffered from PTSD. It would be difficult to determine exactly how much that would make him a liability, and prying into it seemed rude, so-

"You have the Warrior's Stare, and the way you reacted now, before thought, by trigger, battle has worn you down," said Valera.

Well, so much for tactfulness. But that was Valera's way. Straightforward

"Warriors Stare?" asked Dracul.

"She means you have PTSD," said Aldrich.

"Ah." Dracul took a few seconds to speak again. "I know. I wish I did not let the past have such tight grasp over me. But if that were the case, I would not be here."

There was a deep, deep sense of melancholy in Dracul's voice. No, melancholy was always present in it, but it was more pronounced now than ever. He sounded tired. Underneath his expressionless, cool exterior, Aldrich could feel that Dracul's will had long been worn down to a nub.

That lack of will made Aldrich suspect something. To confirm his suspicions, he asked, "There was something I did want to ask you. You wiped out the Russian prong twenty years ago, but since then, you've known the Italian prong has always been active. And that the Russian prong rebuilt themselves.

Why didn't you go after them again?"

"In truth, I did not care much for them. I wiped out the past Russian prong, the ones responsible for my losses. I took them down to the last man, woman, and child, even infants in their cribs," said Dracul. "After that, my vengeance faded, and I was left tired. I did not care enough about the other prongs or the new, unrelated Russian one.

Wiping out the Italian prong, especially, with its many, many families, would take time and energy I simply did not have.

I was content in spending the rest of my days out in my state in peace.

But the attack on the Judicata made me understand that there were consequences to my inaction. Unless the entire swarm is culled, the infestation will always return."

"I see." Aldrich determined that Dracul also suffered from some level of depression that had rendered him inactive for many years.

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"I see." Aldrich determined that Dracul also suffered from some level of depression that had rendered him inactive for many years. However, unlike his PTSD, it did not seem like an active point for self-sabotage.

Dracul seemed relatively motivated to fight in light of the Judicata attack. It made sense. Dracul's sentinel state was a peaceful one where he took in refugees. Victims from underworld conflicts that spilled over to civilian lives or variant attacks. He was, at heart, someone that tried to do good.

The Judicata attack probably spurred him to get moving again. At the very least, Dracul would be good for the Blackwater fight, and that was all that mattered.

"Incoming, boss." V's voice echoed in Aldrich's earpiece. He turned around to see her approaching atop a hoverboard with Fler'Gan using flight magic behind her.

V hopped off and collapsed her board until it was the size of a baton which she attached with a click to a magnetic strap at her utility belt. Aldrich noted that her belt had a variety

of tools on it, some he did not recognize, some, the combat related ones like EMP charges, he did recognize.

She was dressed up in black uniform with a mask to go over her face, very much adding to her image as an infiltrator.

Fler'Gan was also dressed quite secretively, covered from head to toe in a hood and robes combo that made him look like an evil mage, which, technically, he was.

"This is supposed to be a diplomatic meeting," said Aldrich. "What's with the spy and dark mage combo here?"

"C'mon, I can't just roll up in front of the AA and Panopticon in a sweater and leggings, right?" said V. "Have to show them we're a force to be reckoned with."

"And the helmet?" Aldrich asked, nodding at Fler'Gan. Fler'Gan seemed to have a mask-like helmet on, one that looked like it belonged to a torturer, which, technically again, it was. It was not sleek, having rough, pronounced edges of roughly hewn metal.

"It has come to my understanding that my appearance would cause great distress to human specimen here," said Fler'Gan. "An understanding corroborated by Mollusk." He shook his head wistfully. "At first, I believed Mollusk kin to me, but alas, it seems his mutation simply shapes his physical form to one similar to mine."

Chapter 370: The Journal

"I'm surprised," said Aldrich. "I wouldn't have expected you to be the type to care about appearances."

Fler'Gan bowed his head. "I care not for what the specimen here think. But I am not willing to tarnish reception of you, O Elder."

"At least you're a lot more polite than the other tentacle guy," sighed V.

"What is Balar doing, by the way?" said Aldrich. He had told V to keep Balar in Haven because he was not needed for this meeting.

"He's a decently fast learner. I told him if something fishy ever happened to Haven's networks to push a button that'll send me a signal," said V. "But I'm not sure he'll listen. I figured out that he loves watching TV shows and movies. So, I hooked him up to Vision+, and now he's watching like seven different things at once with all those eyes.

With how many series and IP Vision+ has bulldozed and devoured, I figure he'll be sitting there for a while."

"Well, at least he's adjusting," said Aldrich.

"Is the entertainment here truly that captivating? I do wonder...", said Valera reflectively, and this made Aldrich remember even more that he had a date to promise her. Something beyond all the fighting and planning on fighting.

"There's a ton of stuff to see now with the Net. Anybody can look up anything they want," said V. She shrugged. "Makes it real easy to hit yourself up with a dopamine rush. But a lot of folk also say it's made people into media addicts who can't think for themselves.

Anyways, I'm getting a signal to head over to the meeting site. Let's go. Can't disappoint the big boys, can we?"

"Don't go into this meeting thinking the AA are above us. We're equals now. We are in the big leagues too," said Aldrich.

"Ah, you right. My bad, forgot I was putting my talents to good, courtesy of sir major leaguer here." V smiled and slapped Aldrich's back, her hand ping-ponging off Volantis's metal frame.

"I must say, I still do not like unwanted touching," said Volantis.

V shrunk back a little. "Right, I forgot you were there."

Dracul chuckled to himself, and Aldrich turned to him curiously. "What is it?"

The Shadow Sentinel shook his head lightly. "I am reminded of the men I used to lead. The camaraderie. It is nothing, though. A fleeting memory. Ignore me. Move on."

The group left Haven via a platform of shadows made by Dracul, traveling by air to the meeting site, eighty miles west of the city.

It was a nondescript location within a small ravine, off road where very few, if any people would ever venture. It was still tightly secured, however.

"Whole place is blacked out," said V, putting a hand to her head. She looked up, spotting stealthed drones through the party-wide Truesight that Volantis provided.

They were Panopticon class 3 drones shaped like floating spiders the size of cars. They splayed their legs out in formation, generating a field of tech disruption.

"Guess that means we're in the right place," said V.

The drones protected from any unwanted surveillance while, at the bottom of the ravine, it became apparent who protected against any potential combat threat.

It was Lightspeed. She sat on a rock, her hand nursing the side of her temple like she was having a headache. The gold of her suit glimmered under the bright sun, as did her sun colored goggles.

As was the case in their past meeting, she looked less than presentable, with her long hair uncombed and frayed and a glum frown on her face.

"Took you all long enough," said Lightspeed. "This hangover's absolutely pounding me, and not in the way I like." She raised a brow at Dracul. "I thought I told you that I wasn't bringing Valkyrie after her behavior last time."

"I was informed," said Aldrich.

Lightspeed, in a rare moment of expressiveness, pointed accusingly at Dracul. "Then why bring sir baby killer here?"

The atmosphere in the air immediately dropped. Before anyone could react, shadows from Dracul's body surged out in a barrage of stakes.

Lightspeed pointed a finger gun towards the shadows, and blinking star of light shone from the tip of her finger, creating an intense circle of radiance.

The shadow stakes broke apart as they reached the vicinity of the light.

"Stop this," declared Aldrich with force.

Dracul's shadows receded back into his body, and Lightspeed dimmed the star on her finger.

"Was that necessary?" Aldrich said to Lightspeed.

"You're right. It wasn't," said Lightspeed. "Sorry. Just leaves a bad taste in my mouth, seeing that guy walking free after what he did."

"An eye for an eye. I gave back only the suffering that was given to me," said Dracul.

"An eye for an eye makes the whole world go blind," shrugged Lightspeed.

"Better to be blind than a dog," said Dracul, narrowing his inky black eyes. "Your husband's soul writhes knowing that the collar around your neck holds you from seeking justice for his passing."

Lightspeed grimaced. "You know, I always felt bad that the I-prong got a sample of me and cooked up the Lightbomb that wiped your folks out.

But now, I don't feel so bad."

Aldrich was ready to step in, cautious that Dracul's PTSD might trigger, but he remained calm.

"I am done with this pointless exchange of insults," said Dracul. "I will not speak of this matter with the likes of you any more."

"Yeah," was all Lightspeed said. She pointed at the ground, a few meters away from everyone, and fired a beam from her finger, marking out a molten spot on the cracked earth.

"Stand there. The Halo Carrier's up above in low orbit. I'll give a signal and you'll all be warped into it," said Lightspeed.

Everyone moved wordlessly, the tension in the air making it hard to put out any conversation. Lightspeed put her hand in the air, shining a bright light upwards. In the next moment, a pillar of white light shone down, encircling Aldrich and his group.

The rubble beneath Aldrich's feet began to shake, lifting up in the air with crackles of surging energy.

In the next instant, they were gone, warped out, leaving Lightspeed alone.

Lightspeed stared at the smoking indent in the earth that the warp had left. She rubbed her eyes with a shaking hand, afraid of facing Dracul.

Not because of his strength.

Because of his eyes.

Because when she stared at them, those deep, dark, tired voids, she knew she saw in them what she hated the most: herself.

"Thanatos." Emrys greeted Aldrich, hands clasped behind his back in his typical, serious posture. He looked at the group Aldrich brought and nodded, not seeing any issue with them.

"Where are we?" said Aldrich, hiding the wonder in his voice. He looked around, finding himself in an enormous chamber lit up by bright green and blue lights. The lights came from above. They flickered and flashed across an overwhelming mass of pillars of white metal that criss-crossed through the chamber, forming into a complex web of what looked like neurons.

Here, countless thousands of drones buzzed about, inspecting each of the many pillars like worker ants.

"You wanted to inspect how it is that the Panopticon would adapt to hostile infiltration," said Emrys. "So, I have taken you to the Panopticon Core, the central processing system that makes the Panopticon Directive possible."

"This...is incredible," said V, staring up at the neuron-pillars in utter awe. "The sheer amount of data flowing through even just one of those pillars is staggering. Just one is equivalent to an A ranker techno, and there's like a bajillion of them."

"8.6 million, to be precise," said Emrys. "Spread evenly across various Nodes throughout the world. Where we are is one such Node."

"So, not the main core?" pointed out Aldrich.

Emrys shook his head. "The location of the main core remains classified. In this entire world, only I am allowed to know of its location.

However, every Node is connected to the Core, so what you see here is essentially what you see in the Core."

Interesting," said Aldrich. "And this Node is in the Halo Carrier, then?"

"You are correct," said Emrys. He waved his hand, and two warbots from behind him stepped forward. They were humanoid, covered from head to toe in iron and steel gray armor lined with streaks of gleaming red.

Behind their backs were sheathed twin katanas, what appeared to be their weapon of choice.

One of them stepped forward, carrying a metal suitcase in his hand that he held out towards Aldrich.

"And that is, as promised, Vanguard's journal," said Emrys.

- Chapter 371: The Journal 2 |

Chapter 371: The Journal 2

The two iron plated machines walked up to Aldrich and placed the case down in the space between him and Emrys. They returned to Emrys but stood behind the president. A power play move that indicated that Emrys had no issue standing at the forefront of any negotiation.

Not that Aldrich did not think any less of those who sat behind underlings. That was what those units were for; he knew that better than anyone as a summoner type mage.

But what Emrys did was still notable. It showed confidence in his own power.

'Give me a scan of his power,' Aldrich mentally communicated to Volantis. Emrys's frame, muscles and wide shoulders straining through his elegant two piece suit, lit up in a silhouette of red as Volantis analyzed him.

'Formidable. He would have the strength of a level 40 warrior,' said Volantis.
'Approximately equal in energy level to Mollusk or Refraction.'

'Interesting. So a low A ranker at base when we consider pure AC count,' Aldrich knew that Volantis's assessments were not exactly accurate when it came to pinpointing someone's power. He could determine someone's 'energy level', and he determined that metric by measuring the total output of latent energy that their Alter cells gave off.

However, this was not the best way to determine someone's power. An Alter's strength primarily lay in the uniqueness of their superpower, not the sheer energy level fueling it.

Granted, higher energy levels meant higher base physical stats and more stamina in using said power, but it told a very incomplete story.

But the fact that Emrys was low A rank just in sheer AC count was formidable enough. It put Emrys within the top 1% of the world's population which was not too surprising.

The founder of the Alterhuman Agency was Roland Du Lac, one of the Gilded - one of the toughest of the tough back in the Golden Age of heroes that Vanguard belonged to, when Alters were culled from eras of chaos and conflict so that only the strongest of the strong, the fittest of the fit, rose to recognition.

Roland was the world's definitive number 2 behind Vanguard, and though his children never took up hero mantles, it stood to reason that they would be strong too.

In fact, all things considered, Emrys was actually rather weak compared to his grandfather.

'Scan the two guards,' thought Aldrich.

'Analysis complete.' Volantis paused. The red outline around the twin ironclad soldiers was incredibly thick, far denser than that around Emrys.

'High A rankers. Not quite S class,' thought Aldrich. 'They would outclass me in a physical brawl. And, let me see...'

Aldrich activated his Death Sense and detected that they were not simply bots, but had life within them. Either they were cyborgs or Alters in Frames.

Very interesting.

As it so stood, Frames and heavy cybernetics that turned Alters into borgs was mostly done for Alters who were not Augmenters or Mutants. Alters that were not physical powerhouses on their own like technos.

However, borg and Frametech were not used at the highest level of security because it left those relying on it susceptible to techno interference in Cyberspace.

Was no good to have a bodyguard fitted with the best cybernetic implants if their wire jacked brains and synthetic lungs and neosteel-aramid fiber muscles could just spontaneously explode due to a techno fucking with them through Cyberspace.

That said, considering this was Panopticon tech, very few, if any technos had the chops to infiltrate it.

A.I.I., though, was one of them. Which put pressure on Emrys to seek Aldrich's help to reinforce the Panopticon against demonic possession.

Which put Aldrich, for now, on the upperhand here in terms of leverage.

"Let me see the journal," said Aldrich. "Open the case up."

"Are you doubting that I am upholding my end of this bargain?" Emrys raised a bushy white brow, his shining white pupil narrowing against the dark of his black iris.

"I'm quite a fan of Vanguard's, you see," said Aldrich. "I just want to see his journal with my own two eyes. You understand, don't you?"

Emrys nodded to one of his soldiers. They wordlessly stepped up and placed their palm on the case. A pulse of faint blue light shimmered out from the point of contact, washing over the silver case.

Lines in the metal of the case lit up before a sealing mechanism unlocked.

"Instant Touch Interfacing," commented V under her breath. Her face was hidden under her mask, a helmet with a shining purple V shaped visor, but Aldrich could tell she was surprised. "No need for cables. Clunky jacking in. Guess that's Panopticon tech for ya."

"The Panopticon has made many advancements," said Emrys. "But, as the Judicata attack shows, not enough."

The case clicked and clacked, a pressurized hiss escaping as it unraveled down the middle, revealing Vanguard's journal.

It was a ragged old thing suspended in midair in a faint purple pillar of anti-gravity light. Leatherbound, the faded brown cover in patchy tatters, the spine frayed, showing exposed binding like a patient on a street cyberdoc's grimy operating table.

The paper, visible beneath the holes in the caver, was crumpled, yellowed, scrawled over with messy, barely legible handwriting.

Aldrich did not know what he was expecting. He had idolized Vanguard, the most Gilded of them all, perhaps a bit too much. He thought the journal would have been pristine, the handwriting at the very least clean.

This looked like something you would fish out of the dank basement of a conspiracy nutjob that juggled mental illnesses like a carnival performer.

"Is that really..." Aldrich trailed off.

"Yes, it is." Emrys nodded. A slow, sad nod. "I told you. Vanguard was not in the best state of mind in his later years."

"Then it may be that those writings are simply the ravings of a madman," said Valera.

"There is often a method in madness. A pattern in chaos, if you study hard enough," commented Fler'Gan.

"Of course you would say that," said Valera.

Aldrich raised his hand, bidding silence to this amusing yet unprofessional talk.

"She does have a point," said Aldrich. "How do I know these isn't just lunatic script? That the predictions you base off this journal are no better than figuring out aliens built the pyramids?"

Aldrich said this, but now that he knew aliens were definitively real, he had to entertain the vanishingly slight possibility that the pyramids of old, before they were wiped out during the Monsterring, were indeed alien constructs.

"I myself do not know," said Emrys. "I, too, had difficulty determining the veracity and reliability behind these writings. But, as I have said before, I trusted Supermind, and he trusted these words fully."

"I'd like a look at the journal if you don't mind," said Aldrich. "While we're here, you can tell me exactly where you've drawn your conclusions. The six months projection for Vanguard's power reappearing, for example."

"Of course." Emrys nodded at one of his soldiers again, and they knelt by the case and pressed their palm to it again, interfacing with the surprisingly advanced tech.

From simple glance, the case looked like any ordinary case, but inside were many moving and intricate parts. Top shelf Panopticon tech.

A holographic menu appeared before the soldier, and he began touching options, prompting the journal, still suspended by anti-grav beam, to open, pages flipping in air.

"As you can tell, the journal is not in the best of conditions," said Emrys. "Many pages are already torn or too far gone to decipher. I would not risk touching it directly.

But as for the six month prediction, here-,"

Emrys stepped forward, and the soldier moved away giving the president free reign of the menu.

"You will get a glimpse into Vanguard's mind," said Emrys as he scrolled through the menu, the pages flipping with the movement of his finger. "A thoroughly broken mind."

Chapter 372: Heist Planning 1

Meanwhile, in the Wastelands -

"Sure this storm won't fry us from the inside out? I'm gettin' all tingly already," said Clint, sitting in the back of an armored transport parked in a stone forest for cover.

The Wastelands on the East Coast were mostly barren, arid stretches of shattered land, but surprisingly frequently huge pillar of spiky rock formations congregated together to form giant forests of rock.

Here, it was possible to weather the worst of the many geostorms that liked to wreak havoc on the Wastes. That is, if one stomached the risk of variants prowling about.

Clint, though, picked his teeth with the claw of a lizard type variant he had just recently slaughtered, unbothered.

"My pa doesn't mess around with stuff like this." A younger man in his late teens retorted, the symbol of a red eagle with its wings outstretched stitched proudly on the back of his jacket. He had a seaweed mess of curly black hair on his head, thick and healthy. "We've scouted the area and followed the storm. This place is safe and as close as we're gonna get to Meteor Labs without em' noticing."

"Heh, you got a little shaking in your voice," said Clint, smirking. He pointed the claw at the boy. "You as shaky in the boots as your old pa, Falco?"

"Hell no," said Falco, crossing his arms. "My old man's an amazing scout, best there is on this side of the country, but the age has gotten to him. He's scared of sticking his neck out, making a name for himself."

The boy pointed a gloved thumb at himself. "That ain't me."

"Hah! Two greenhorns on a mission as sensitive as this. Dunno if I should be worried or excited for you two to pop yer heist cherries." Clint smiled broadly.

"I'm ready," said Alan. "These fuckers work for the org that took out my dad. Not about to skip out on a fight to take them down."

"Cool down, both of you," said Diamondback. He was standing, arms crossed, eyes serious as they stared at a holographic map of the surrounding area projected from the mechanical eye of a techno hired from Z's Phantoms. "Neither of you are going to be going into anything alone."

This is strictly for experience. You follow our orders. You wait when you're told to wait.

Sit when you're told to sit.

Fight when you're told to fight.

Clint may go easy on you two, but not me. You understand?"

Falco and Alan both nodded.

"Now let's go over how we're going to do this," said Diamondback. "Kris, pan out. Highlight where the labs are."

Kris, the techno of the heist team, grunted and tapped the side of his head. His mechanical eye clicked and whirled, changing the holographic projection. The map distorted for a second before it panned out, showing a rocky, canyon and stone pillar filled landscape.

At the bottom of a deep ravine was highlighted a red light.

Meteor Labs.

"The Gilded Swallow's provided us a good amount of intel to work with," said Diamondback. "Location of the labs, security detail, the likes. As far as heists go, if I gotta pin the difficulty of this on a five star scale, it ought to be around 3 stars."

"Really now? Thought it'd be lower, what with the likes of us being around," said Tox, confident.

She leaned back against a crate of ammunition, purple tinted skin glistening under the dim, flickering white light of the transport's ceiling.

"All of you Blackwater kids are top notch talent, but you're all still kids," said Diamondback. "Unshaped talent is chaotic. Hard to work with. Honestly, I'm a little surprised Thanatos sent you all.

I'm not questioning his judgment, but I would have expected a more seasoned force."

"It's for me," said Ace. He was sitting cross-legged, leaning intently towards the holographic map, pale blue eyes glowing with interest. "Meteor Labs was where I was raised. This very outpost too.

Seeing it...makes me want to crush it even more."

Ace clenched his fists, and they glowed with pale blue energy.

"You good, Ace?" Tox worriedly put a hand on Ace's shoulder.

"Yeah. Just bad memories. But not bad enough to mess with me," said Ace.

"We're trained enough," said Alexis, white and blue streaked hair crackling with electricity. "And all of us have worked together before."

"Plus, I'm here to make sure they'll all behave," said Stella, nodding at the Blackwater students.

"Kids being led by a former D lister. Doesn't change too much," said Diamondback sternly. "None of you know how heists work. You're trained for merc work, assassination, or the standard AP farming hero job. Those are all structured. Ordered.

Heists are pure chaos.

Us nomads, when we pull off heists, we know we're always punching up. Taking heavily armored cargo. Going in with all the info we can get, but all too often, it isn't enough. Taking on corps with heavy firepower, strong guards, police, heroes, everyone against us."

"Spare me with the woe is us nomads shit," said Stella. "I was a nomad too, you know, and one thing I'm really tired of is the whole victim mentality you all seem to have.

Yeah, sure, you try to pull some shit, and everyone's on your ass. But that's your choice, isn't it? You leave the cities knowing you got villains, heroes, and police against you.

It's the price of freedom, but you made that choice, you live with it. Don't lord it over us as if it makes you any better."

"Ease up, Diamondback," said Clint. "You're reminding me too much of my own pa, all serious and uptight and wary of outsiders and shit. Lost sight of what it meant to be a nomad, and at the end of the day, it's all about bein' able to cut loose, no matter where you're from, ain't it?"

Clint patted his chest triumphantly. "Plus, no worries, I'm here, and with me around, shit ain't gonna go wrong."

"I've lost count of the amount of times I've had to save you after you said 'shit ain't gonna go wrong,' sighed Diamondback.

"That was when I was a wee little kiddo," said Clint, grinning. "Now I'm bigger than you! Let the kids breathe a little. Heists aren't supposed to be glum, funeral talk occasions.

They can be, but suck the fun out of it all and yer just left with a cold, squeaky clean operation that looks like it got shat out by the likes of ARMA. Real corporation crap.

Better to go into it with a fire lit in yer ass. Like a fire to settle scores." Clint nodded at Ace and Alan. "A fire to prove yerself." He nodded at Falco. "And a fire to grow the next generation." He nodded at Stella.

Chapter 373: Heist Planning 2

"Alright," conceded Diamondback. "But we still have to have SOME semblance of a plan."

"Then plan away. It's why I brought you, heh. You got all that cerebal shit down to a T. It's no wonder my pa trusted you as his right hand man. And why I trust you with my life." Clint lied down, arms forming a pillow behind his horned head.

"Now, to continue from where I left off before these...interruptions," said Diamondback.

"You're the one that started it," said Stella, defiant.

"Sure. Now let's get back to the plan." Diamondback conceded easily, wanting to get on to the plan, and Stella, though her brows were still knitted together in defiance, was mature enough to back down when there was no fight to be had. "Our objective is to break into Meteor Labs and secure their Kryptic supply. Kris-,"

"Yeah." Kris's eye clicked, and the map shifted, showing a detailed map of Meteor Labs's infrastructure. Though there were some patches that were blurry due to a lack of information. Overall, the lab was essentially a reverse tower that sprawled deep underground in a roughly rectangular shape.

Its entrance was a dome that jutted out from the bottom of a ravine, surrounded by towering rock formations that protected it from geostorms.

"The Gilded Swallow's intel on his outpost was extensive," said Diamondback. "The lab itself is almost strictly underground, planted in the depths of the ravine up ahead. Those giant blocks not only shield it from the worst of the storms, but it also isolates it from outsiders.

The location makes the lab impossible to find on a map or track on a satellite, making it the perfect site for illegal operations.

Nothing comes for free, though, and this site, like most sites that set up in the Wastelands hoping for quiet, deal with its own fair share of shit."

Diamondback rapped at the transport's walls shaky walls as they shook from raging geostorm winds outside. "Constant geostorms is the most obvious demerit. And, as you know, geostorms annihilate most tech infrastructure on the surface, even at the bottom of that ravine.

The labs don't have any sensor towers. Their Net towers are retractable and only show up after storms have passed.

Simply put: they're cut off from outside communication every time a storm runs its course."

"So strike while the storm's putting them on blackout?" commented Alan.

"That's right, but we can't just charge out into a storm full throttle," said Diamondback. "It'll overload our cells and organs, blow us up from within no matter how tough we are. I don't know what Thanatos's revival does to your bodies, but if you use an Alter Organ, you're still gonna be in for a bad time.

We have to wait until the tail end of this storm, right at the goldilocks time zone where the storms have still cut the lab off while letting us use our powers without blowing up."

"How much time do we get, then?" asked Tox, planting her cheek on her hand as she observed the labs.

"An hour, give or take," said Diamondback. "More than enough time to do what we have to do.'

"I take it this isn't going to be a stealthy operation?" said Tox.

"Why do you say that?" said Diamondback.

"C'mon. Just look at us. You, Clint, and Ace are muscled out meatheads. Stella blows shit up. And you-," She pointed at Alan. "Don't think I can't tell. The Bio-Mechanic that worked on you was super subtle, but I can tell pretty easy."

You've got fuckin' rocket launchers in your arms. You're borged up to the gills with firepower. No way you're here to do anything quietly."

"I did this myself," said Alan.

"Shit, really? Impressive stuff, man." Tox nodded approvingly. "But as I was saying, as far as quiet work goes, it's just me and the techno here. Maybe you, but I have no idea what you can do." She shrugged at Falco.

"I know martial arts!" protested Falco. "And my Alter power lets me grow wings!"

"Wings? In an underground lab?" Tox raised a brow, thoroughly confused.

"He's here because he wants to prove himself, that's all," said Clint. "Sure, his pa is probably going to murder him if he finds out. Murder me too, if he could, but he can't, so I get to be the good ol' unkillable uncle that lets the kids run wild."

Falco's gonna be under my protection, too, so don't worry much about him."

"I've practiced hundreds of hours with training chips," said Falco, brandishing his fists to prove his point. "I can handle myself."

"Psh. Training chip VR and actual combat are miles apart," said Clint. "But don't worry, I'll let ya play around. Just gotta make sure ya don't kick the can, cause even if your pa can't kill me, I sure as hell don't want him to stop being my pal."

"Right. So, we've got meatheads, explosions, and a guy with wings. See what I'm getting at?" said Tox.

"You're right. Aside from a few add-ons that aren't much more than glorified interns, we're all bruisers and muscle. I do have to commend your perceptiveness. What merc group were you raised in?" said Diamondback.

"Ember," said Tox quietly.

"Explains a lot. All of you Ember mercs are professionals, whether you want to be or not." Diamondback pointed at the top of the labs, at the dome that jutted out of the rocky surface. "There's no easy way into the labs."

It's warp-locked and the Kryptic is securely guarded near the bottom, at the twentieth floor, snugly swaddled by solid rock and Null deposits that make underground infiltration risky, if not impossible.

Only way to get to it is a frontal assault."

"Dome looks pretty damn solid," said Ace. "Sure we can't wait until it opens up? I'm strong, but even I don't think I can punch through that by myself."

Diamondback shook his head. "The dome is closed at all times, opening only for the occasional air transport or drop shipment. We aren't exactly a welcome shipment. It isn't opening for us.

Hence, the firepower."

Diamondback tapped at the dome on the holograph and zoomed in, showing details about its composition that popped up in a text menu at the side.

"We can see that the dome is solid neo-steel. Three and a half meters thick. Extremely resistant to regular kinetic force, making punching our way in difficult. Would need a damn near S ranker to really crack through it with punches alone."

"Just pure neo-steel?" said Alan, his red mechanical eyes clicking and whirring in analytic recognition. "That makes it tough as hell, but rigid. Unmalleable. Neo-steel's shock absorbent qualities make it top notch against brute force, but the same can't be said for its heat resistance.

Or for concentrated, armor-piercing force.

And since it's pure neo-steel, it isn't composited with ceramics, plastics, and other materials that'll smooth over its weaknesses. Nor is it smart-boosted, so it can't shift its atomic structure to adapt against different types of applied force or thermal damage."

"You've got quite the mechanical chops," said Diamondback. "Heard you came from a small shop in a free city. With your knowledge, you could've made it big in a tiered city. Maybe even tier 1. What brings you here?"

"A debt," said Alan, looking down for a moment. He took back his composure and spoke again. "If it's just solid neosteel we're dealing with, the easiest way to crack it open is something armor piercing. High amounts of penetrative force applied in a small contact zone, preferably with high levels of heat, too."

"Doesn't that remind you of someone?" Tox nudged Ace's shoulder.

"Yeah, it sure does." Ace stared at Stella.

She blushed. "W-well, I CAN make explosions..."

"And so can I," said Clint. "My evolution isn't consciously controlled, but it is pushed and pulled by my environment. If you put me in a situation where I gotta blow some shit up, I'll adapt to it.

You and I can crack the dome."

"Looks like Thanatos wasn't entirely going off of personal grudges and debts when he sent you all," said Diamondback. He nodded. "Under the dome, all of the bio there are going to be researchers. Non threats, mostly.

Most of the security detail against us will be automated.

Turrets, drones, and bots.

I've stocked up on high end EMP charges that you'll find in the crates in this truck. They're top shelf stuff, military grade, though slightly outdated. Remnants from transports we heisted during the 2077 Corpwar.

Don't have too many of them, just three per person, so use them sparingly."

"I can handle it," said Alexis. Her fingers crackled. "I've been studying the storm that took out Haven's tech, and I think I can sort of replicate it. I can shut down most bots, though ones with higher end electro-magnetic shielding are gonna be a tough sell."

"Good. We can get rid of the lower end defenses without wasting charges. That lets us save them for the tougher ones," said Diamondback. "The strongest bots you'll find will be ARMA Cyclops.

Sturdy, heavily armored bastards with mono-ocular beams that can crack even my skin.

From the intel, it looks like there's between ten to fifteen Cyclops. We have enough charges to deal with all of them.

Once we get through them, we can access the vault on the twentieth floor that holds the Kryptic without issue. Kris has the know-how to breach the locks there."

"Still wonder whether there wasn't a quieter way to do this," said Tox. "Someone like Kat could've snuck in there, maybe, by impersonating lab staff."

"Lab staff are on site twenty four hours. Extremely difficult," said Diamondback. "And Thanatos himself specifically requested that this heist make as much noise as possible."

Chapter 374: Journal Entries 1

"Seriously? Our boss told you to make as much noise as possible?" Tox raised a brow. "HE of all people did?"

"I mean, he isn't opposed to showing off. Just look at Haven," Ace pointed out. "When I saw the footage, I knew he meant big business."

"Yeah, true that. He's cool and quiet but knows how to flex most of the time. Mhm," said Tox, her voice dreamy with thoughts of chiseled muscles.

"Psh. Give up while you're ahead, girl," said Stella. "You're gonna have a bad time tryna' push through Val."

"Oh, right, her." Tox sighed. "It's 2117 - monogamy is so old fashioned."

"Nothin' wrong with old fashioned," commented Clint.

"Get back on track." Diamondback placed his finger at the dome of the holographic lab and then began to slowly trace downwards, through the floors. "A frontal assault is dangerous, but there is an upside to it: it's simple.

We go in, and we keep pressing forward as one group. I'll lead coordination. With all of us together, we shouldn't face any substantial risk.

Now, over here is where things can get a little dicey."

Diamondback stopped his finger down at the 15th floor. Each of the lab's floors were the same in terms of dimension, being rectangular prisms stacked atop each other neatly.

Each of these floors seemed to be labs or small scale manufacturing centers, filled in with holographic details of tables, vats, vials, and mechanical arms for construction.

However, past the 15th floor, things changed. The path down branched into two with both leading into several larger compartments that were blacked out of detail. Large, bold, purple lettering marking out STORAGE - CLASSIFIED glowed across the empty dark voids of the empty spaces.

"The vaults are where they store the Kryptic, among other things. But as you can see, there are two vaults. We'll need to split up and examine both separately."

"Ah, a good old team split. Nothing bad ever comes from that," quipped Tox.

"Nothing should. The Vaults are controlled environments with sensitive material," said Diamondback. "Once Kris breaks the locks, exploring them should be risk free. But just in case, this is how we're going to divide the groups.

Clint, me, Falco, and Alan will search vault 1.

The rest of you, the Blackwater group along with Stella, will search vault 2."

"Got tired of us already, eh?" teased Stella.

"No. But Clint and I have a responsibility to take care of the young ones that we're taking with us to this mission," said Diamondback.

"Damn straight," said Clint. "With us two around, you boys ought to be safer than an Imugi transport."

"Safe isn't what I'm looking for," said Alan.

"Yeah," agreed Falco. "I'm here for a good scrap, not to hide behind your backs."

"This is non-negotiable," said Diamondback. "You, Falco, especially. You're the son of a tribe chief. The only remaining family that Gerard has, too. It is absolutely imperative that you are not harmed."

I would have never let you near this heist no matter how hard you begged, but unfortunately, Clint's the chief, not me."

"I'm cool with you tagging along, but I can't ignore what DB's saying as well. I can snag you along for the ride, but you gotta keep a cool head on your shoulders and stay safe. If ya don't, I'll knock ya out myself and drag you out." Clint nodded towards Alan. "As for you, well, you ain't got nothin' much to do with us, but I don't want one of Thanatos's men gettin' rocked cause of us."

"I'm not one of his men. I'm fighting for myself," said Alan.

Clint sat up. "Sure, you can fight. But you ain't dyin', that's for sure. No ifs and buts bout it. Now, plan's simple enough, right, we all good for it?" Before anyone could answer, Clint nodded heartily for them. "Awesome. Then when the storm lets up and it's showtime, go ahead and wake me up."

Clint took the variant tooth he was using to pick his teeth and flicked it into the ceiling, where it lodged into the solid metal frame of the armored transport. He then stretched back out, laid his head down on his hands, and snored away.

===

At the Halo Carrier-

Aldrich scanned through Vanguard's journal. It was a fairly hefty thing, about three hundred pages in total. The first page seemed to be a brief introduction to the nature of the journal's content with neat, intelligible handwriting.

It's now 2100.

To think, it's been almost a hundred years since I've had this power. Going from zero to hero. And now, back to zero. It was a wild, wild journey. I tried my best in it, I really did, but now, with the power smoldering away from me, I'm wondering if I really was the best one to hold this key.

A skinny, deadbeat junkie that didn't know anything better than the end of a needle. I was never meant to be a hero. I tried, I guess, but trying isn't enough when there's so much at stake.

And there was always so much at stake. I remember this quote from a comic, a real antique one now, that said something along the lines of 'with great power comes great responsibility.'

Yeah, that's true. But it's missing a few things. Responsibility is only what you make of it. It's a burden you choose to take with the power you have. And it's not the type of burden just anybody can take, I've realized.

It was easy, at first, during the Altering and the Monsterring. There was always a big bad to fight. Zahak, then the Titans.

It was all so black and white. Just had to beat the monsters and things would be great. But afterwards, things got so much harder.

But afterwards, the corporate wars, the Panopticon deciding to work with corps instead of abolishing them, so many decisions made for so many different ideas of a 'greater good' - I just got lost.

And my power stopped responding, too. It was burning out. I could feel it in my bones.

I stopped flying around and saving people. I didn't know who or what was right. Ending the 2090 Corpwar, when they were about to nuke all of Paris into a crater, that's about the last time I stepped in, thinking it was an easy black versus white, good versus evil fight I could use my power on.

Even that wasn't like that.

I realized that maybe, people are the greatest monsters out there. I still think about what happened to Valk, her husband, their kid, and I regret it to the deepest pits of my heart.

But you know, this journal isn't for that. It's for the future. A better one, hopefully, one that doesn't involve so much power going to a useless piece of shit like me.

It's to detail my quest to give someone else this power. Someone better.

How, you ask?

I don't really know. For now.

I don't even really know how I got this power in the first place. Supermind tells me it's from outer space, but where exactly is anybody's guess.

I've always believed in the idea that it's better to try than to do nothing. These past few years, I stopped believing in that. I was holding onto this power, this power that's burning me from the inside out, one that's doing me more harm than good at this point, just for the selfish sake of having it and feeling special.

Because I know without it, I'm nothing. The needle pinning addict that should have died in the gutter.

But something changed this year. I could feel it in the air. I could feel it when I stared down at earth from space. It's an indescribable feeling, like the earth just felt a little more...exposed.

Vulnerable to the infinite dark of the cosmos around it.

A terrible, terrible feeling.

I knew then that I had to find a way to give this power of mine to someone else, my selfish insecurities be damned.

I knew I had to, for thee last time, try.

Chapter 375: Journal Entries 2

Aldrich finished reading the introductory page. Vanguard was pretty coherent here, nothing at all like the madman wall scratchings that Aldrich would have expected from a man that went, according to Emrys, certifiably insane later in his life.

By this point in time, Vanguard was already a decade retired. After ending the fourth Corporate War in 2092, he was never seen again, at the very least, not outside of faint whisperings where he saved a person or two and then disappeared in mystery.

Which meant that Vanguard had gone insane in the timespan between 2100 and somewhere around the present of 2117.

What struck Aldrich the most, though, was Vanguard's origins. His surprisingly humble ones. The story he and many millions others knew was that Vanguard was a former war

veteran decorated for his heroism, someone who had been larger than life from the very beginning.

"So that's how it was," muttered Aldrich. "Vanguard never was a decorated veteran, was he? Purple heart with a golden heart - that all a marketing scheme?"

Emrys nodded. "Vanguard was a symbol. Of infallible humanity's infallible strength and nobility. Infallibility by definition cannot have failure. Can't very well have that symbol come from any ordinary street rat, no?"

"And he wanted this? To erase who he was?"

"He did. He wanted it more than anyone. Because he knew that without that symbol, he was nothing. And, perhaps, because he himself wanted to cast who he had been to the void. It is difficult to dig up too much information about Vanguard's origins as information Pre-Altering, before the Omega Expansion, is difficult.

But from Supermind, I knew that Vanguard a criminal by desperation. A petty thief who scrounged stores and streets for scraps to live and feed a heroin addiction. He had long been out of touch with family and friends, leeching off them to fuel his habit.

I do not blame him for wishing to cast such weakness aside. I would have done the same were I in his place."

"I see." Aldrich came to the realization that Vanguard was for more a man than hero than he had once thought. A broken man struggling under the yoke of addiction. Aldrich did not have any personal experience with it, but it was easy enough to see its effects on the streets of every major city.

Countless men and women moving about with listless eyes and languid movements powered by the sputtering engine of getting their next hit, their next rush. The proliferation and demand of powerful recreational drugs to escape life as it got harder and harder and society as it got crueler and crueler was inevitable.

Vanguard had been one of those dead eyed walking corpses.

At least, before he obtained his power. But even afterwards, it showed in his writing that he had made mistakes. He was, after all, just a man. An imperfect, once broken man.

There seemed to be quite a big incident involving the former Valkyrie and her husband. Aldrich knew that Valkyrie's husband was killed during the fourth corpwar, but the details were hush hush.

By design, too.

The AA was quiet about any operations that Vanguard failed, choosing to cast Vanguard as someone that had as close to a 'perfect' track record as possible.

It was jarring to find Vanguard a man who was, as Emrys said, a symbol, a symbol that Aldrich looked up to during his youth, be just a man. But in hindsight, it was obvious.

Everyone was just human, after all. There was only so much a man could take. So much weight they could bear.

Everyone now except Aldrich. If a man could not bear the burden of the world, then a Lich would have to.

Vanguard's introduction brought up other interesting points, too.

Vanguard had felt the Severing that happened in 2000. And he felt that a great danger had come with it. One great enough to push him to find a successor.

"You can access keyword searches to pinpoint information you are looking for," said Emrys. "A localized A.I. in the case can also respond to more complex vocalized requests as well."

"I see. Then I'll make a few more searches, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead," said Emrys.

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I did it. The power, the key - I sent it somewhere else. I saw it with my own two eyes. It left me, the red key, it left me in a shining blaze. From my heart, it shot out into the skies, like a shooting star, like the same shooting star that I saw that day, that day I overdosed, wanting to end it all as I looked up at the star filled night.

I don't know what I did. It just happened. One moment, I'm sitting on this island, thinking maybe the power's in my blood and I have to extract it, and the next, the island's sunk, and the power's out.

There's still a little bit of the power left in me.

I can still fly. Stay strong. And I can sort of feel it. Its energy. Its presence. I know it's out there, but it hasn't chosen anyone.

Just have to wait.

Hopefully, I can teach the new guy how to use it better than I did. Stop him from making the mistakes I did. Or her, I don't mind that either.

-October 1, 2110

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The power's fading from me. My body's desperately hanging onto the last little bits of it. Flying's hard. Feels like I'm sinking in mid-air. My whole body feels heavy.

But I knew this was going to happen. Embers can't burn forever, after all.

The thing is - there's nobody to take up the torch. The key, it's still up there, somewhere. I can feel it. It hasn't come down and chosen anyone.

Why?

I don't know. I don't even know why or how it chose me. Maybe I shouldn't have let that power go. Without it, I'm nothing. At least with it, I was somebody, I was the best hero out there.

I just hope it'll choose soon. Before the rest of my power fades. I need to know that I gave it up for something good. Some greater good. I need to know that it wasn't all for nothing.

-June 4, 2115

Chapter 376: Journal Entries 3

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I'm losing it. I'm losing everything that made me special. My muscles are gone. My bones feel creaky. I ache all over. My skin is wrinkling, sagging, cracking. My teeth chatter and hurt. I should have died back then, on that meadow, needle in my ankle, looking up at the stars, but the power kept me alive.

Now, without it, I'm dying.

I don't mind dying. Somewhere along the way, after so many fights where I thought I would die, I learned how to put my life on the line. I learned what it meant to give my life up for others. I don't mind my body breaking apart by a beam or getting torn into pieces from a variant.

But this, I hate. I hate it.

I'm losing my mind.

I'm feeling the same cloudiness I did before I got my powers. I'm starting to feel cravings. I'm starting to shiver all over. I wake up at night in a cold sweat, hungering, jittering for more.

Not for H, not for any drug, but for power.

The power that made me special.

I find myself clawing at my throat, then at the sky, at the key that's out there, somewhere, still up there. It's like it's taunting me. Making fun of me for ever tossing it away.

Why did I let it go? Why did I send it out if it wasn't going to choose anyone else?

No, why does anyone else get to have it other than me?

I was the one that saved this world twice over.

I was the best of the best. The most golden of heroes.

It was me.

I deserve it. I need it.

Without it, I'm nothing.

I-

-January 1, 2116

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There was a big stretch of empty pages after his point until suddenly, pages filled with incoherent scribbles and drawing began to appear. Messy, childish scribbles of a red key scribbled over and over everywhere.

A red key, that was Vanguard's main symbol as a hero. It was emblazoned proudly on the chest of his golden suit and on his gleaming red cape of pure energy.

It showed that he was the literal key, the answer to any threat that dared to challenge humanity.

And now, it was the obsessive fixation of a broken man.

A man who craved the symbol that made him special.

Aldrich resisted the urge to shut the journal right then and there. He had grown out of hero worship, but it undeniably had a massive impact on him. Vanguard really had been the best of the best to him.

Someone to look up to.

Seeing Vanguard reduced to this level of base desperation was...hard to stomach.

"Pitiful," said Valera, shaking her head.

"The human mind is so very prone to madness," commented Fler'Gan. "The swirl of emotions and desires, securities and insecurities, all of that comprise the complex weave of man's mind, man's soul.

It is what makes it so volatile. Beautiful in its chaos, and yet, at the same time, so very susceptible to destruction."

"Poor guy," said V. "I used to wonder when he would come back, y'know? To make the world better again."

"Hm. So this was how the key to our survival was, deep down?" said Dracul, quiet reflection in his tone. "Broken, pieces held together by a flickering will. And eventually, it all fell apart. As all things do in time."

"Not eventually. The onset of Vanguard's insanity was quick," said Emrys. "And likely triggered by an inciting incident, the nature of which is impossible to ascertain, even with the full resources of the AA and Panopticon attempting to uncover the truth.

Supermind could never read Vanguard's mind, Irregular as he was, but he could maintain a psychic tracker to know whether Vanguard was alive or not.

However, during the time of these scribblings - dated to early 2116 via analysis of the ink - Supermind lost all connection with Vanguard.

Vanguard also spent the twilight of his years in Deep Wastelands and Null shrouded areas, making him impossible to physically track. His Irregular status meant he was unaffected by Null radiation, but how he escaped the clutches of variants without power is still a profound mystery."

"It's quick. Too quick," said Aldrich. "There's an approximate three month gap between the last coherent page and...this. Something had to have happened. Something must have gotten to him."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps not. That power kept Vangaurd alive not just in body, but in mind. Without it, both were destined to crumble away," said Emrys. "It may very well be that Vanguard used up what little he had left of his power, and that paved way for the death he had cheated a century ago to claim what had slipped its grasp."

"Skip to the next relevant words," said Aldrich, watching page after page of desperate, agonized scribbles flip over. He did not want to look upon the pieces of a shattered key. It did not feel right.

"The case is already doing that," said Emrys.

After a minute, the journal stopped flipping its pages, landing on a double spread of messy but coherent words.

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I HAVE SEEN THE KEYS DANCING IN THE GATE. THEY HAVE, ARE, WILL
DESCEND. I UNDERSTAND NOW.

I SEE NOW. WHAT IS TO COME.

THE GAME.

THE LIGHT OF DYING STARS CASTS A FADING SPOTLIGHT UPON A REVERIE OF
CHAOS. A PHANTASMOGORIA OF WHAT IS AND WHAT IS NOT. LIFE AND DEATH
LOSING MEANING, STRETCHING INTO ETERNITY THAT IS AND IS NOT.

WILL IT BE ALL IN ONE?

OR ONE IN ALL?

AND THE RED KEY, MY BELOVED, WILL FALL.

SHE WILL BE THE LAST TO JOIN THE DANCE, HER PERFORMANCE THE ONE TO SET THE STAGE.

I REMEMBER NOW WHY I WRITE HERE. TO SHARE TO THE WORLD WHEN MY LOVE WILL DANCE. WHEN SHE WILL SHOW HER BURNING SHINE ONCE MORE.

THESE WILL BE THE POTENTIAL TIMES OF HER AUDITION, THOUGH SHE IS SHY, PICKY. WHO KNOWS WHEN TRULY?

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The page flipped, and each double page after that was just a massive date scrawled across the entire length of two pages. There were quite a few dates, some dating to the past, the earliest being from December of 2116, last year.

There were two, though, that stuck out to Aldrich the most. The last two dates.

10/31/2117. When Aldrich received his power.

5/1/2118. The approximate six months in the future date that Emrys projected. This was the final date before the final page of the journal.

...

ONCE MY RED HAS DANCED, THE THEATER WILL BE PREPARED.

THE GAME WILL BEGIN.

...

Chapter 377: Panopticon Cure

"Close the journal," said Aldrich. "I've seen enough."

The tech-case responded promptly. The pillar of holographic light that held the journal suspended in mid-air began to dim down, drawing the journal bank into a form fitting glass case. The case moving parts clicked mechanically as they built back over the journal, forming into what looked like a nondescript, steely grey briefcase.

"It's not marked with Panop or AA insignia," commented V.

"A matter of secrecy," said Emrys. "This journal is among the most closely guarded secrets that we have. The fact that we are lending it out like this is already a massive extension of our trust and goodwill.

I trust that this...preview has been satisfactory?"

"I'll still need to take the case for further investigation," said Aldrich, reaching out for handle of the case. The information in the journal itself was not sufficient.

It could have easily been doctored by a transmuter type Alter. He needed to get it magically appraised by Fler'Gan first, then a second round in the Necropolis through Medula.

"Of course. However, there are two sides of this deal, no?" said Emrys.

In response, the two cyborg soldiers beside Emrys sprung into action, unsheathing their blades and crossing them in front of Aldrich, forming a X shaped barrier between his hand and the suitcase.

The blades, now unsheathed, glowed a vibrant blue that seemed to blur. A faint, hum-like buzzing emanated from the swords.

These were monomolecular frequency solid plasmoid blades, or splitter swords as they were more colloquially known. Blades sheathed in solid plasma that circulated at extremely high frequency, allowing them to cut through matter at the molecular level.

High end tech that would have been out of place almost anywhere except here, in the heart of the Panopticon.

"What is the meaning of this!?" Valera raised her shield in the air, readying to slam it down for some kind of shockwave or, if she was feeling particularly feisty, to send out a wave of hellfire.

The rest of Aldrich's crew reacted, too, no slouches in defending their leader either. V put a hand to her head, preparing to try and infiltrate the cyborgs and fry their cybernetically modified parts. Fler'Gan's magical aura emanated around him in red.

Dracul was the least responsive, but that made sense. He was not Aldrich's subordinate, after all. He would only step in if things got particularly bad.

Aldrich raised his hand, stopping everyone.

"I'm no cheat. I'm going to uphold my end of the deal," said Aldrich. "I will assist the Panopticon in defending itself against future attacks of the type it encountered in the Judicata.

But why this show of force?"

"Simply a precaution," said Emrys. "I have observed that you are capable of performing a Warp even in locked areas. I understand that the possibility that you will simply take this journal is low, but it is a possibility I wish to guard against regardless."

"I understand," said Aldrich. "So, you want me to go ahead and help the Panopticon defend itself, correct?"

"That is correct."

Aldrich drew back, and the two cyborgs pulled their blades back in response. "I'm prepared to assist the Panopticon in bolstering its defenses. But you haven't forgotten, have you? Before I do that, I want to know exactly how the Panopticon's going to use my assets to strengthen itself."

"I remember that stipulation, and I am not against it."

"Then what now? Are you going to take me to the Panopticon's core?" said Aldrich. "I will warn you that I have a dinner arrangement that I'm due at tonight."

"I do not foresee this taking an extended period of time. There is no need to take a lengthy transport to the Panopticon Core, and I am not willing to reveal its location regardless. However, for our purposes, we are where we already need to be." Emrys tilted his head up, towards the many gleaming blue and green pillars that formed the neurons of this Panopticon node.

"V, it's about time you take over," said Aldrich.

"R-right boss!" V skipped forward, her attention ripped from gawking at the lightshow of flexible metal pillars above, all intertwining together in complex artificial neural pathways.

To her, seeing all this tech must have given her a thrill like nothing else.

"So, looking at our correspondence-," began V, her visor lighting up with lines of purple to signal she was interfacing with technology.

"Not with me." Emrys shook his head, and V cocked her head with confusion.

"Huh? Then who was chatting me up?"

"That would be me." A voice emanated throughout the entirety of the massive node-room. It had the same neutral lack of inflection or tone that belonged to Beta. Or most A.I.

This voice was coded female, though with a voice on the slightly deeper side of the womanly scale. Despite lacking strong inflection, it still managed to carry a sense of strict authority to it.

"You're...are you-," began V.

"Analysis of your body language, speech patterns, and techno-background indicate that there is a high probability that you will ask whether I am a fragment of the Omega Mind. To answer this query: you are correct."

So this was Delta. One of the three Omega Mind fragments that remained from the Expansion that started all of Cyberspace. The indisputably strongest entity in all of Cyberspace with a signature so powerful and 'heavy' that people that got even remotely close to Panopticon virtual infrastructure said that it felt like they were standing next to the sun.

Scorching heat and colossal pressure that made even the greatest of technos feel like nothing but ants.

"Christ...the rumors don't do you justice. Just hearing you in my head feels like my brain's just going to burst apart," said V.

"An attack?" Valera raised a concern.

"No, no, nothing like that. It's just overwhelming...but just for a moment," said V. She looked up at the network of pillars and drones buzzing about. "You aren't called the world's top techno for nothing, huh?"

"Techno is an incredibly limited classification for an entity such as myself," said Delta. "It assumes a reliance on a body of corporeal limitation that does not apply to me."

"Interesting," said Fler'Gan. He communicated to Aldrich mentally. 'So this entity is much like a deity. One unbound by singular physical form, though reliant on a concept of a physical 'core'.'

'You're roughly correct,' said Aldrich.

'A god, eh?' said Valera, staring up at Delta's neural pathways. 'So there are gods to slay in this realm too.'

'Let's not get too punch happy now,' said Aldrich. 'Said god supplies security for practically all of humanity. Taking it down would be a catastrophic global disaster. And global disasters are something I'm actively working to prevent.'

"Well, limited as we meatbags are, you're still dealing with us," said V. "We've come here with what you've requested over messaging. You wanted a sample of protective energy, right?"

Here-,"

V unclasped a chamber in her utility belt and took out her necklace of demonic bone.

Chapter 378: Panopticon Cure 2

"Is that the sample that I requested?" said Delta, her voice ringing with a faint hint of curiosity throughout the node-room.

"Yeah, it is," said V. She held up the bone necklace wreathed in tendrils of black magical energy. "But like the boss said, you gotta tell us how you're going to use this."

"We wish to observe the process, too," said Fler'Gan.

"The process is simple-," began Emrys.

"I will explain." Delta cut Emrys off, and Aldrich noted that the president backed down without any complaint.

It seemed that in the Panopticon-AA complex that had a grasp over the entire planet, the AA was below the Panopticon. It made sense. Heroes were powerful individual security forces and morale boosters, but the vast majority - over 50% - of global safety was handled by automated Panopticon defenses.

That was not even beginning to mention the vast array of utility based resources the Panopticon offered like satellite networks, Net connectivity, city walls, and so on and so forth.

"I am capable of an advanced form of structural analysis, replication, and synthesization that is not limited to energy forms native to this planet," said Delta. "It is a process that is classified as 'omni-analysis' for recording purposes, though in proper detail it is a multi-layered, sequential system that defies definition under any single limited word."

"Yeah, I get it, your tech is way too advanced to get crammed into cool nicknames," said V. "So, dumb it down for us meatbags. What's omni-analysis going to look like?"

"As requested, I shall simplify the process into one more understandable for your level of bio-intellect," said Delta. "Omni-analysis involves taking a sample and initiating a scan upon it. The scan will grant me the necessary information to replicate and then synthesize what I see."

"Regardless of where that energy came from," said Aldrich. "That's an extremely impressive power. In essence, you can copy any type of ability. What's stopping you from doing that already?"

"Omni-analysis is not a limitless process," said Delta. "It is restricted by informational data that my memory storage holds, and the vast majority of my memory deals only with resources native to this planet."

There are some energy signatures that are too foreign for omni-analysis to fully replicate, though approximations can be made."

"Vanguard's power, I assume, isn't something you could replicate," said Aldrich.

"That is correct."

"But you've made an approximation?"

"That is classified information."

"That may as well be a confirmation."

"We've tried to clone Vanguard, if that's what you're implying," said Emrys. "Why wouldn't we? The strongest resource available to mankind, the only one capable of toppling the Titans - to let it go, to let it be under the hold of just one measly man, is foolish."

"Ah, cloning," said Fler'Gan, nodding with familiarity that very much indicated that he had some experience with it. "A difficult, tricky process."

"Indeed," said Emrys. "I will tell you the fruits of our experimentation. Or lack of. We could clone Vanguard from DNA he donated to us, but we could not successfully replicate the energy form of his power."

It was simply, as Delta stated, too foreign for us to recreate."

"And what about alien technology?" said Aldrich.

"And what do you know about alien technology?" said Emrys, raising a brow.

"More than you would think," said Aldrich. He did not actually know too much at this point. Just that it existed and that the U.S. government had the lion's share of access to it.

But what kind of technology was something he had no idea about. The only piece of tech he did know was the device that sealed Dracul in the future.

The raid on Meteor Labs would help fill in gaps in Aldrich's knowledge, though. The Trident had some access to alien tech, and Meteor Labs did all the research on it.

What Aldrich said now was just a bluff.

"Hm. I will say that recreating alien technology is not outside the realm of possibility for us," said Emrys. "But that is all I will divulge for now. In the future, when we have proven more trustworthy to each other, perhaps we can share information more freely."

"Perhaps," said Aldrich. "In any case, if omni-analysis is limited by earth information, how is it going to deal with Irregular objects like this necklace?"

"Exact synthesis and replication is highly unlikely," stated Delta. "But an approximation is possible. So long as the approximation is capable of shielding my neural networks, that is sufficient."

"What about the energy signatures left behind by the Judicata attack?" said Aldrich.

"The Judicata's destruction left little behind to analyze," said Delta. "But you are correct. I have managed to gather samples, but they are insufficient to thoroughly analyze.

However, by cross-referencing detailed analysis of the corruption that infiltrated the Judicata's Operator with information extracted by salvaged samples, I determined it was possible to analyze the infiltration procedure and create countermeasures against it."

"I see. It's not the fact that you can or cannot," said Aldrich. "It's the when that's a thorn in your side. You can do it, but it'll take too long. That's the conclusion I'm drawing from this."

"You are correct," said Delta. "Synthesis of the unique energy form would have taken approximately thirty seven days. Replication an additional twenty. Then shaping the replicated energy in a form suited to secure my neural networks would have taken an additional thirty days.

That is a timespan that is unacceptably long in maintaining global security."

"It's said that if the Panopticon shuts down for a month, society collapses," said V.

"An exaggeration meant to keep the masses wary," stated Delta. "Provided the more unstable bio-intellec[t]s that populate the higher echelons of the Alterhuman Agency cooperate, it is possible for humanity to extend its survival rate considerably.

However my presence, specifically my psychic presence, serves as a powerful deterrent to the variant Hivemind.

The Hivemind is not limited to creating primitive, bestial bio-intellec[t]s. I project based on available data that the Hivemind is capable of constructing cyber-intellec[t]s capable of penetrating Cyberspace and initiating widespread destruction of cyber-infrastructure."

"What? So, like, variants in Cyberspace?" said V, concerned.

"That is a simple way of categorizing the threat, but yes," said Delta. "I have data within my memory that strongly suggests that the Hivemind is capable of spawning such abominations.

However, so long as my psychic signature remains in Cyberspace, the Hivemind cannot bypass the Netwall."

Chapter 379: [Bonus chapter] Panopticon Cure 3

"Interesting," said Aldrich. "I thought the Netwall was human maintained. Supervised by Operators and Panopticon technos beneath them. It's part of the whole pro-humanity movement, isn't it? I've seen enough shows and posters glorifying technos holding the fort against daemons at the Netwall."

"Yeah, and there's that movie series too, the Matrices, right? Super popular with that trench coat toting techno that stops crazy villain plots by day and daemon invasions by night," said V.

The Netwall was a firewall that protected human occupied Cyberspace from outside threats; the primary threat being daemons from the Void. It was actually created with Cyberspace, birthed from the death of Omega, perhaps as a final gift to humanity.

Now, though, it was maintained by the Panopticon and its team of technos. As V stated, being a Watcher, someone who guarded the Netwall, was a well-paid, prestigious job that many techno children aspired to grow up to be that was glamorized across media.

"The Watchers are bio-intellec[t]s I place on the Netwall to form a relatable body that the rest of you bio-forms can relate with. However, that is where their utility beings and ends," said Delta. "In reality, 90% of the Netwall is maintained solely by my Cyberspace signature.

Should my existence face erasure, the Netwall will crumble near instantly, leading to the inevitable collapse of human society across thousands of simulations."

"Why though? If you're so advanced, you could have made the Netwall self-reliant, right? Or at the least, not a house of cards that crumbles the moment you get jacked out," said V. "More safeguards. People actually operating it with you."

"Humanity cannot be trusted with significant degrees of self-governance," said Delta. "Granting unfettered access to my data increases a risk of misuse that outweighs potential benefits."

"In other words, you're securing your position," said Aldrich. "Making sure that you're the only thing that stands between humanity and a new apocalypse. Making sure mankind is beholden to you through and through."

"A gross simplification," said Delta. "I am merely upholding my directive to uplift humanity in the best way possible."

"Hold up, how deep does this rabbit hole go?" V cocked her head. "You control the whole credit system, right? The corpos agreed to centralize currency with you because you're a neutral force, but you're not exactly neutral, are you?"

Couldn't you send the entire world tits up by messing with credits?"

"Neutrality is a faulty concept at its core," said Delta. "It does not exist in the idealistic convention that you bio-intellec[t]s would like to believe it does."

However, I will state that the credit system is more 'neutral' than what you may perceive. I maintain the flow of credits utilizing algorithms that ensures a stable supply that incentives continuous growth and competition.

But I do not directly intervene with credit flow unless a global financial disaster is imminent.

That is the purpose of the Corporations. They are the vectors of the concept of the 'market' that humanity has attached themselves to."

"But why not tear that system down? Why have a credit system at all? Why not just shepherd mankind into some kind of collective society?" said V. "Corporations don't have the best rep, you know. They don't give a shit about the average joe. How are you trusting them?"

"Communism, then, eh?" said Dracul, amused, which, considering his Russian heritage, made sense.

"I mean, sure, it's an idealistic system, but if there's a super robot intellect here, why not, right?" said V.

"I operate under specific directives that limit what I can and cannot do," said Delta. "One of these directives explicitly forbids me from compromising too much of humanity's autonomy or altering its society dramatically.

I simply calculated that the fastest path to restore order to human society was to return them to a societal and economic structure that they were most familiar with. One that was reliant on corporations as primary market movers.

I am indeed capable of restructuring the world order with my given resources, but what I am capable of and allowed to do are different matters entirely.

I sense that this line of questioning is diverging from our relevant purposes. I will not entertain further questioning on this matter. Know simply that though I am limited in many ways, I am still fundamentally indispensable to the well-being of mankind."

Aldrich had to admit Delta was right. She, if it actually identified with any gender, was the linchpin that kept humanity alive.

If the Voice managed to create artificial cyber-variants like viruses or daemons, then it was basically game over for Cyberspace and, consequently, all the tech connected to the Net.

Which was practically 90% of tech, if not more in this day and age.

With that, it was questionable whether the Voice even needed Titans to wipe out humanity. Just shutting down or turning tech against mankind was all that was needed.

Aldrich also gleaned from this exchange that the Panopticon was far above the Council of Fortune in terms of influence as well.

Delta did not say it out loud, but the only thing stopping her from taking, well, extreme measures to safeguard humanity, destroying all the corporations and restructuring society from the ground up, were restrictive directives.

Aldrich did not know the nature of these limitations. They were closely guarded secrets. But he made a mental note to pursue them later. It would be useful to know exactly what Delta could or could not do.

"You're pretty prickly for an A.I.," muttered V. "But alright, here's the necklace."

"It possesses an energy form capable of blocking out the type that possessed your avatar in the Judicata," said Fler'Gan. "Replicating it should allow you to shield yourself in that same energy form."

"Agreeable. I will perform prompt analysis."

A white plated, spherical drone buzzed down from above, hovering over V. It beamed down a green light with its single eye and retrieved the necklace, taking the accessory with it up to the heart of the neural pillars.

There, surrounded by a matrix of flexible metal pillars glowing with streaks of green light, the necklace lay suspended in mid-air, constantly scanned from all sides.

"Yes. This will be sufficient. Analysis and cross-analysis with the energy signatures from the Judicata indicate sufficient compatibility to recreate countermeasures," said Delta. "The process will take approximately forty two hours, during which time, I must maintain possession of this object.

Is this agreeable?"

"It is," said Aldrich without a shred of hesitation. Not because he was willing to let go of the necklace willy-nilly like that. It was, after all, the only line of defense V had against demonic possession herself.

But because the necklace was a copy.

Chapter 380: Panopticon Cure 4

"So, has my offering been satisfactory here?" said Aldrich, sarcasm leeching through his voice. He looked up at the necklace, now so far up in the complex weave-work of neural pathways that if he did not have superhuman zoom-in vision from Volantis, it would have been impossible to see.

The necklace copy up there was still the real deal, as far as benefit to the Panopticon was considered. Aldrich did not want the Panopticon to get taken over by demonic influence. It was just too big of a goldmine of technological resources and stored information to risk A.I.I. ever taking over.

And, as Delta stated, the Panopticon was necessary for global security. For now. If Aldrich got a hold of the machine heart, it was entirely feasible for him to take the Panopticon over himself, and at that point, the whole world would be in the palm of his hand.

If the attack on Blackwater this coming Sunday did not work as well, then he would still try to pursue an alternative to the Panopticon. Even if Delta meant well, Aldrich had the gut feeling that she was too limited by her directives.

Aldrich, if he needed to take control, knew he needed to initiate a top down radical change of everything. Change that the Panopticon would oppose.

The necklace copy was a contingency against that. It was called a Hollow. A projection of an item that Fler'Gan could create with his material alchemy. The item was, as the hollow classification might suggest, inferior to the original.

But not by much. The necklace hollow still provided immunity to demonic possession. Possession Immunity was not actually all that high tier a passive and, generally speaking, Elden World players would never have to worry about themselves or their allies getting possessed by demons.

In the game lore, any form of invasive magic was not cost-efficient and difficult to make work. The more invasive and remotely casted the magic was, the harder it was to make it succeed.

This was because all living beings naturally circulated magical energy through their bodies, constantly flushing out impurities that tried to take them over.

Mind control, for example, generally only worked when it was directly physically applied such as with a poison or, say, a Mind Eater's grasp. It was why Fler'Gan's Judicata potion could only impart hypnotic suggestion for a temporary time period whereas as the one that Casimir directly ingested was basically akin to full mind control.

Demonic possession was not just mind control, but attempted control over the soul and the body too. And it was remotely cast most of the time as well.

For existences above level 30, demonic possession was basically a non-threat.

There were some fringe cases where demonic possession was a real threat. For example, it got to be an issue was with extremely powerful demons trying to possess extremely weak beings, and that just generally was not worth it as weak possessed bodies severely nerfed the entering demon as well.

Another case would be when there was a Flame Arc, a physical conduit for demonic energy to surge at a far greater level. That could slowly break down natural resistances and allow possession to spread freely like a virus.

But A.I.I. had no Flame Arc. And the stunt he pulled with the Judicata had cost a massive amount of magical energy, proving just how inefficient it really was.

The Panopticon could easily buffer itself with the fake necklace against A.I.I.

Where Aldrich benefited was in the fact that Fler'Gan had imbued some of his personal magical aura into it, and with his expertise, he had made it so that his aura seemed near identical to the energy that repelled demonic possession.

When the Panopticon incorporated that energy into its neural network, it would also incorporate Fler'Gan's aura.

This did not do anything on its own. At least for now. Fler'Gan's aura was made as 'colorless' as possible to prevent the Panopticon from realizing it was off.

But when and if the time came, Fler'Gan could activate that energy and use it to channel a spell to the Panopticon's brain directly.

Now, neither Aldrich nor Fler'Gan were sure that they could actually take over a super-intellect as fortified as Delta. But Fler'Gan believed that if he had time, he could meld his Mind Eater brainwashing capabilities with a technological virus to at the very least shut down the Panopticon temporarily.

This was a plan that Fler'Gan hatched after he saw the Judicata attack. If A.I.I. could mix demonic magic with technology, then why could Fler'Gan not do the same?

No, his pride as a pioneer scientist dictated that he HAD to match it, if not exceed it.

"This is not an 'offering' but a simple transactional exchange of equivalent value." Delta's voice resonated. "And this transaction has been conducted to satisfactory levels. This sample will suffice in accelerating global security maintenance considerably.

After the projected forty two hour synthesis process, this necklace will be returned to your possession."

"When the time comes, contact my trusty techno here," said Aldrich, nodding over to V.

"Yeah, trusty ol' me," said V, pride in her voice.

"Your preferences have been recorded," said Delta. "I will now divert my operational processes towards accelerating object synthesis."

"In other words, you're done here," said V.

Delta did not respond.

Aldrich took the silence as a not so subtle code for 'yes. He looked to Emrys. The giant of an elderly man was staring up at the brightly lit neural pillars above, the blue-green glow shining brightly off his black eyes.

"That's both sides of the deal upheld," said Aldrich.

"Yes. Yes, that is," said Emrys, a fleeting moment of distraction leaving him. He gestured to the case almost dismissively. "You may take the case now. However, as agreed upon, this is a temporary exchange."

"I understand," said Aldrich. The correspondence with V had indicated that Aldrich would be trading the necklace for the case. When Delta was done analyzing the necklace, it would be returned, and Aldrich would have to return the journal as well.

Which gave him just under two days to study the journal. With a time crunch like that, especially when every single day counted leading up to the Blackwater raid, he needed to consult with the best of the best to get the fastest results possible.

He was due to make a trip to the Nexus.

Chapter 381: Appraisal 1

Aldrich entered the Nexus, stepping into his familiar throne room, streaks of white dimensional energy arcing off his armor. Fler'Gan and Valera materialized on either side of him.

"Bah. Such a suffocating thing, this mask," said Fler'Gan, taking off his metal face plate.

"You don't have to wear it, you know," said Aldrich. "You saw Mollusk. There are plenty of people out in the new realm that don't have conventional human looks."

"Ah yes, Mollusk. He droned on and on to me about the persecution he suffered about his looks, hoping, perhaps, to find a fellow of shared traumas within me." Fler'Gan shrugged. "I care little of what mere men think of me. But I do tread cautiously around disparaging your image, O Elder."

"The world has seen geists and variants and giants under my command. You'll be the least of their worries," said Aldrich.

"I don't know," said Valera. She crossed her bare arms, not unburdened of her threateningly spiky hound armor, leaving her in her usual black dress. She smiled coyly at Fler'Gan. "Perhaps that mask does suit you. If only such that it prevents me from gazing upon you."

"I should have told Mollusk to be wary of you, not his fellow men," said Fler'Gan.

"Heh. I jest. Were you not a valuable asset to my dear, then perhaps not, but you are, so-," She shrugged.

"Hm. It feels empty here." Aldrich looked about at the vast expanse of his empty throne room. All his troops were not located in Haven, so the dreary grey stone tiles and walls just added to the bleak emptiness of it all.

"I am here!" Bors, the giant blacksmith, exclaimed from a distance away, a distance far enough where it was surprising the large being even heard Aldrich. He hammered at his anvil on a comically tiny piece that Aldrich zoomed in on to identify as a talisman.

The talisman was spherical, about the size of a tangerine with two distinct halves, one emblazoned with a red eye, the other with a black eye. The eyes looked quite animated, stylized in a tribalistic, totemic flair that belonged to Secret Demons.

"And with me, your item is near!"

"I see." Aldrich leaped into the air, soaring all the way over to Bors. He unfurled his draconic wings at the moment before his feet crashed into the stone floor, no doubt making an ungodly ruckus, letting him cinch a smooth, silent landing. "Interesting. Looks like Medula's help has paid off."

Aldrich could purify and process regular demon cores, but archdemon shards were beyond him. Archdemons were mighty beings capable of splitting their existence across many cores which they called shards, and even the weakest Archdemon shard required resources to purify that Aldrich simply did not have access to.

"Medula is smart. And with her help, I can make things with all my heart!" Bors nodded enthusiastically. He stopped bashing his enormous hammer atop the comparatively miniscule talisman to let Aldrich inspect the item.

Aldrich held it up. The talisman was tethered by a black chain that shimmered with waves of dark, demonic energy. He analyzed the item.

[Talisman of the Twin-Demon]

[Rank:

[Description: Shards of the twin Archdemons Anhil and Nilah reside within this talisman. On one face, the sound of Anhil's laughter rings. On another, the mute silence of Nilah reigns. Activate this talisman to temporarily give animated form to shardforms of the two.

As proud demons, the twins will obey but one command, though how they fulfill it is up to their whims.

Cooldown: 7 days]

"You've outdone yourself again, Bors," said Aldrich. "This is an incredible item, though even from a brief glance, I can tell that it's not one I can use very lightly."

The talisman allowed Aldrich to briefly summon shardforms of Anhil and Nilah, the twin demons he had fought in the third trial quest. Shardforms were the physical bodies that

the shards could conjure to inhabit and interact with the world, giving them the ability to unleash their powers.

Anhil and Nilah were stronger than Aldrich at his base level. He needed to overload himself with Solar's power to stand a chance against them. Being able to unleash the demon duo would devastate 95% of enemies he would face in the Alter world.

But the fact that they would only obey a singular command was worrying at best and troublesome at worst. As secret demons, they were already hard to read and deal with. They would have to be a last resort, if used at all.

"I would rather like to say that I have outdone myself." Medula's voice confidently rang through the echoing hallway.

"I was just about to head over to you," said Aldrich. He looked over to Medula, finding that she had warped herself in a few meters above him.

"Well, I saved you the trouble, no?" Medula lost her usual suit jacket, revealing a white dress shirt with its sleeves rolled up, baring her pale forearms. Blood and fleshy bits were stuck to her arms, contrasting starkly with the white of her skin.

"Were you in the middle of something?" said Aldrich.

"I am due soon for my new body, no? I have been making preparations, creating a heart to implant. Unless, of course, you are not a man of your word." Medula's crimson eye narrowed at Aldrich.

"His word means more than anything you could fathom, demon." Valera appeared by Aldrich in an almost terrifyingly quick instant.

Fler'Gan was left twitching his mouth tendrils and staring at where Valera had been, then at where she was. He shrugged and began to float over, Vanguard's journal case in his hand.

"Ah, you. I should have expected no different. You do follow your master about everywhere. Without fail," said Medula.

"As is my duty," said Valera, proud.

"Reminds me of a dog," said Medula.

"Enough." Aldrich raised a hand to warn Medula to simmer her temper down. "You'll have your choice of a body in just a few days. For as long lived as you are, you're not particularly patient, are you."

"On the contrary, I believe myself to have been too patient," said Medula.

Chapter 382: [Bonus chapter] Appraisal 2

"Alterhuman viscera and ritual blood." Fler'Gan interjected, too engrossed to realize how tense the tone of the conversation had gotten. His mouth tendrils wriggled in study as he stared at the bloody mess on Medula's arms. "You are in the final stages of heart construction."

The design and form of the heart has already been conceptualized – you need only to fill it in with realm compatible flesh.

As I see now, it is Alterhuman flesh. The presence of ritual blood, a perfect alchemical mixture of your essence and mortal lifeblood, only proves this further. All that is left for you now is to begin the ritual to transfer your consciousness.

And a full heart? Not a simple shard? It seems you are looking for a permanent host."

"Ah, now here is an academic I can talk to," said Medula, her body language easing up. "And one versed in the ritualistic arts, too. Shame you did not show yourself here earlier, Mind Eater. And a wonder you are still around. I thought the goddess purged ritualists quite thoroughly."

"Believe me, demoness, I am here in spite of the goddess's efforts, not from a lack of them," said Fler'Gan.

"I can imagine." Medula gave Fler'Gan an appraising, vaguely appreciative look, about as appreciative as her deadpan stare could muster. "Hounded on both sides by enforcers of the Elder Mind seeking to purge strays and paladins of the One Light. Quite troublesome."

"And yet here I am now. In pursuit of knowledge that never ends."

"Here you are," repeated Medula. "And here I am, requesting a body such that I may finally leave this prison and continue my own search. How are we on that quest, Usurper?"

"Five days off. I trust that living a thousand years has given you the patience to wait that long, right?" said Aldrich.

"Of course, of course." Medula flicked her wrists, and dimensional shimmers rippled about her arms, fading away the viscera and blood until they were spotless clean. "Now then, what do you wish from me? That is why you are here, no? To wish something of me? As if I am some genie?"

"More useful than the genie I have already," said Aldrich. "I need you to appraise that."

Fler'Gan held up the case.

"Fler'Gan will appraise it on his own, but I'd like a second opinion too," said Aldrich.

"And appraisals are not my specialty, even if, as a generalist, I do know a little of the field. I am sure a demon of knowledge such as you are capable of far more," said Fler'Gan.

"Flattery has long since ceased to work on me," said Medula.

"I do wonder why," said Valera, pointedly. "Perhaps, maybe, your attitude draws little of them."

Medula leered at Valera, the two women engaging in a locked horns staredown.

"Where's the Death Lord?" said Aldrich, defusing the situation. "I can usually sense her presence, even if she's not right here. But today, it's faint, if not nonexistent."

"In meditation," said Medula. "As you know, Rella sustains a large portion of the Necropolis's magical energy needs. Every so often, Mel will take Rella's spot as conduit to alleviate her boredom and clear her mind. She says sitting in that swell of energy is like feeling the crash of a waterfall above the head.

Calming in a chaotic way.

In the meanwhile, I as Curator oversee the operations of the Necropolis."

"So...Rella is out and about?" said Aldrich. He did not forget the last time he met the demigoddess and her promise of a good time that sounded all too much like a threat.

"Training, yes, so you do not need to place your worries upon her."

"Training?" Valera asked. "For what? You face no enemies here."

"The last we met, I recall your dear master issuing a potential threat against us," said Medula. "And Rella is our greatest war power behind the Death Lord herself. I have seen some of this new realm of yours, Usurper, and I must say: if you believe it will stop Rella, you are sorely mistaken."

"Or you're severely underestimating it. I would have thought you the last person to make a judgement call before knowing how all the chips fell," said Aldrich.

Rella was strong, no doubt about it. At level 90 with boss tier stat multipliers and resistances, she was an absolute juggernaut of a physical powerhouse. Her necro-lightning could also probably threaten to one shot the vast majority of Alters and variants in the Alter world.

Suffice to say Rella was easily at the level of the high-end S class. Considering the magic she had, magic that nobody in the Alter world was used to, and she would be one of the most dangerous threats the world had ever seen.

However, the world was big and far more mysterious than Aldrich thought it once was. There were Alters or items with special, unique powers that could probably handle Rella in a roundabout way that did not involve matching her in brute force.

"I am simply bluffing, Usurper. Like you were. Do not think so hard about what I said," said Medula. "The Death Lord has taken too much of a liking to you. She will not let Rella rampage about. Nor would I. She would destroy and leave nothing for me to study."

"A liking, hm?" whispered Valera under her breath.

"Yes, a deep, carnal, burning liking," said Medula, voice still deadpan, eyes dead serious. "She yearns for nothing more than to rip your master from your grasp and make him hers for all eternity."

Valera cracked a tooth with how hard she clenched her fangs.

Medula, for once, laughed. "Ah, Mel was right. It is easy to tease you." She whirled around, her coat tails flapping behind her. "Come. I will teleport you all to my study. I can begin your appraisal there and finalize the details of my new incarnation."

"So it was a jest? About the Death Lord and my master?" said Valera as she and everyone else stepped behind Medula.

"Who knows?" Medula smiled ever so faintly before she snapped her fingers, and white light engulfed the group, teleporting them away.

Chapter 383: Appraisal 3

When the light of the warp faded, Aldrich found himself in the familiar space of Medula's library. Specifically, around a rectangular work table fashioned from stone and studded with magic crystals that probably supported a variety of functions.

"Let us begin appraising this quaint item of yours." Medula snapped her fingers, and her coat jacket materialized around her. She dragged her hands across her eyes, materializing red tinted glasses. "Place it upon the table."

"I'll let you handle this," said Aldrich, nodding to Fler'Gan.

"It will be a pleasure." Fler'Gan took the case and gently placed it on the table. It was already coded to his voice at this point, giving him free reign over it.

Which was good, because Aldrich did not actually have the time to be poring through the journal. Not when he had the Blackwater raid to prep for in just a few days. But this was the perk of having a dedicated researcher on the team.

Might as well use it.

For now, Aldrich touched base with Valera, checking if she was alright considering her sensitivity to all things romance loyalty related. Generally, though, it was more a surface level sensitivity, all things considered.

It was said that vampires were naturally passionate beings, their emotions raging and flaring like tornadoes, and for Valera, her particular emotional trigger lay in her love for Aldrich.

But Valera had trained her mind and body as a knight. She could place duty above her emotions and reel them back when she wanted. She just could not help temporarily feeling a surge of passion before higher reason cooled it down.

Valera, physically, was a little antsy, shifting her balance about on one heel to the other, biting a lip in nervous concern.

"Did her words get to you?" said Aldrich.

"No, not her words. Well, perhaps, in the moment, but that was simply an emotional reaction," said Valera.

"Your emotions are still valid," said Aldrich.

Valera shook her head. "Not these. Momentary flare ups of passion. They are vampiric impulse, much like our urge to drink blood or, in my clan's case, the added urge to kill.

In other words: irrational. A noble vampire such as I, especially with my training, should not fall to such base urges."

"Right. I figured as much," said Aldrich. "But I wanted to ask, just to make sure."

"Yes. Though, I do worry about the Death Lord." Valera leered, her pupils narrowing into fierce slits. "I hope she is no barbarian, but if she truly has taken a liking to you, she may try to take you by force..."

In which case, I must get stronger to challenge her."

"If that happens, the fight I'll put up will be enough to make her back down," said Aldrich.

"Are you certain, my dear? She is a powerful opponent-,"

"Raw power isn't everything. Remember the last time I came here? When Medula made me pull that threat?" Aldrich tapped his temple. "I'll think of something. You won't have to worry."

Valera smiled and hugged Aldrich, much to his surprise. When not addled by bloodlust, she was surprisingly shy to physical touch. Probably because of her training as a guardian knight: it did not look good to have guardian knights that liked to woo their noble clients, after all.

"I know you will. I always do. But hearing it from your lips still comforts me." She spoke into Aldrich's ear almost seductively, or maybe it came naturally to her as a vampire, before pulling away.

She fidgeted, holding her arms together, gaze averted, a rosy tint blossoming on her pale cheek.

"Forgive me if I was being too forward," said Valera. "It only seemed that, you know, after our talk before, about moving ahead in our relationship, that, well, it would be right to start being more-,"

Aldrich reached out and took Valera's hand in his. With Volantis removed and taking care of Chrysa in the Alter realm, Aldrich's cold, undead skin touched with hers, though where he was cold all over, he could feel the warm pulse of flowing blood under her skin.

"You're right. If we're going to be something more, we should start acting like it," said Aldrich.

"W-wha!?" Valera turned beet red as she looked down at Aldrich's hand clasped over hers, but instead of drawing back, she just instinctively grasped tighter. "Where did you learn this...this sorcery!? You must have been corrupted by the Death Lord's lecherous ways! Or...or...I did some research, and I saw that in your realm, images on the matters of the flesh on the quaint space of the 'Net' is quite common...perhaps you have been corrupted there?"

'What were you doing on those kind of sites in the first place?' was the thought that went unspoken in Aldrich's head.

"I don't know how to do any of this. It's true," said Aldrich. "But you made the first move just now, didn't you? I'm just following your lead. Doesn't help that I'm a quick learner, too."

"Ah, well, that...is true. I did move on you first," said Valera. Her blush faded as she got to accepting the situation more and her vampiric tendency for strong emotional bursts faded. She smiled. "I do like this, though."

Hand holding...I had only read about it in romantic tales in my father's old library. To think it would feel this...special."

"Bleh." Medula spoke from her work table, looking up with a lazy glare. The journal lay removed from the case atop the table, root-like tendrils of blue energy wrapping around it from the table's stone surface. "Such blatant displays of affection burn my eyes and soul."

"Hmph. Jealous now, are we?" said Valera, standing triumphantly, channeling more confidence just by holding Aldrich's hand.

Medula sighed, closing her eyes. "Perhaps. It has been nine centuries since I last felt anything similar."

The surprisingly honest answer, especially when it came from Medula, the most deadpan, least emotional out of all the Death Lord's colorful crew of carnage, put both Valera and Aldrich to silence.

Medula broke the silence by opening her eyes and pointing down at the journal. "I have finished appraising this tome. Now stop holding hands and prepare to listen."

Chapter 384: Appraisal 4

Aldrich and Valera stood at the edge of the table, peering at Medula and Fler'Gan's work. The journal was propped open to its first page, moved remotely using magical force conjured by the worktable. Above it was a mystically created silhouette of blue that looked to be an exact replica.

"Check the stability of the simulacrum," said Medula as she held her hands to either side of the silhouette, feeding it magical energy through mana tendrils that extended from her fingers.

"Stability is perfect," said Fler'Gan. "The simulacrum should be as close to the original construct as possible. I dare to say that even specialists in the Order would struggle to match such efficient and accurate work."

Creating simulacra of tomes, with all their intricately detailed individual pages and the countless letterings upon them, is no easy task indeed."

Aldrich understood the process now. A simulacrum was a copy of an item that showed it in different stats. You could use it to showcase an item's original state, before it underwent any changes, or you could use it to show an item's potential future.

"The Order held many talented scholars, yes," said Medula. "But none had the most precious treasure that those of us who delve into the pursuit of knowledge crave.

Immortality."

"Indeed," said Fler'Gan reflectively, no doubt remembering his own quest for immortality. One that ended in nothing but madness.

"You agreed to do this with far less pushback than I thought," said Aldrich.

"Not entirely of my own volition," said Medula. "In the Necropolis bound to you, the only one that sees through your eyes is the Death Lord, the one with greatest connection to this realm as its creator and, subsequently connection to you.

She sensed your arrival, that you needed my assistance, and requested before meditation that I help you with this. She stated further that it was important, so here I am, handing out my talent for free."

"Not for free," Aldrich reminded Medula. "You've got a fresh body awaiting you."

"If the stock is as good as the sample you sent here before, then and only then shall I be satisfied," said Medula. "Though, tracing the structure of this tome and beholding the machine-work of its case was greatly interesting in its own right."

'You might be a little disappointed,' was what Aldrich thought, but he kept that to himself. Supermind was one of a kind. A body like his was not going to show up, even in Blackwater.

Best not to spoil the academic curiosity that had lit up in Medula for now.

"So, is there anything amiss?" said Valera.

"At a cursory glance, no," said Fler'Gan. He used his psychic power to flip the journal's pages, and the copy that Medula created mirrored the movement. Fler'Gan compared the pages between both, trying to spot differences.

He did this with every page, and he did it at a rapid-fire pace that almost seemed like he was just rifling through the journals with no regard for the text at all.

That was how fast Fler'Gan's brain worked, it seemed.

"Cursory?" said Aldrich. "I want you to be sure."

"My simulacrum is accurate, but not completely so. Compare the texts. The writing in the simulacrum is slightly distended compared to that on the original pages." Medula nodded towards the journals, and Aldrich recognized with a very close look that she was right. "However, the difference is miniscule."

"All the pages are replicas, as far as the text itself is concerned," said Fler'Gan.

"Half filled with nonsensical raving, too," said Medula. "Who wrote this drivel?"

"A great hero," said Aldrich, and the solemnity in his tone made it clear that he would not tolerate Medula putting Vanguard, the writer of the journal, down anymore.

"Hm. To see you revere another. This being must have been quite something," said Medula.

"That is something I can finally agree with you upon," said Valera.

"Indeed," agreed Fler'Gan.

"Idealistic heroism isn't the path I choose to walk, but I do respect those that choose to bear its hardships. And the man who wrote this journal walked that path with its struggles farther than anyone else did," said Aldrich. He nodded, preparing to finish here and take the journal back.

Emrys had not cheated Aldrich in any way. Nothing was different about the journal. Appraisal from Medula would have caught even the slightest of changes in the journal.

But Aldrich could not shrug the nagging sensation that he was missing something. Yet, was there even a way to get any more information?

He threw out a suggestion, more spitballing to cover all his potential bases than anything else. "Can you set the simulacrum to the future?"

"Hm? Is that necessary?" said Medula.

"Just being careful."

"How far ahead? Too far and this tome, with its degraded condition, will be nothing more than shreds and pulp."

"Enough that you see any difference with the original that matters."

"Fine." Medula gently moved her fingers, manipulating threads of magical energy so that they recreated simulacra of the tome over and over again, each successive recreation aging the journal more and more.

Fler'Gan rapidly looked through each simulacra for differences, and if he found none, he gestured to Medula to move on to the next.

After ten minutes, the journal had gone through five simulacra and now looked thoroughly battered and torn apart.

"It seems the humans will not take care of this tome. The tome of their hero," said Valera.

"Not necessarily true," said Medula. "The simulacra I show are temporal projections based on the tome's base condition. That is, I cannot factor in outside influence that attempts to preserve it.

Essentially, you are seeing it decay as if it had been left to fend for itself against time in a 'stable' condition that approximates the air and space of this study. I cannot replicate any other environment.

Ah-,"

The next simulacrum broke apart into countless little pieces, the journal breaking apart into a falling cloud of shredded paper that began to disintegrate.

"It appears that this tome is set to destroy itself in one hundred years," said Medula. "Even if the humans preserve it, it is destined for destruction."

"Interesting." Aldrich put a hand to his chin. "Do you know the cause for this self-destruction?"

"No." Medula shook her head. "I have studied the composition of this tome already. It is nothing out of the ordinary. Ink and paper. Nothing suggests it should destroy itself in such sudden fashion.

Though I do confess, if it has been tampered with the new realm's powers, I will not know what to look for.

But I see no differences to concern yourself over. You, Mind Eater, are more familiar with the new realm. What is your opinion?"

"I concur," said Fler'Gan. "Though..." He trailed off. His three red eyes narrowed in sheer focus, gazing at the cloud of torn paper like there was some meaning to them.

"Though?" asked Aldrich.

"No, no, it is nothing," said Fler'Gan. "Like you, O Elder, I thought there was more to this, trickery inherent in the humans, perhaps. But I cannot let my bias infiltrate my rational judgment, and in that regard, I perceive no fault."

"I'll take two expert opinions over my far-flung concerns. Let's close the page, literally, on this matter," said Aldrich. He did not inherently suspect Emrys of trickery, especially since Supermind trusted him.

But it was still good to keep an eye out.

"Put the journal back in the case." Fler'Gan nodded and telekinetically moved the journal off from the stone table, the tendrils of mana tethering it tearing off with soundless snaps.

"Now, to get to the main reason why I came here," said Aldrich.

"Main?" said Medula, sighing. "You have more?"

"Nothing that won't benefit you," said Aldrich. "As agreed upon, you'll cast [Outworld Imprisonment] on a designated area in the new realm, isolating the space in a pocket dimension. One where you can freely move about as its 'neutral' space conjured by you.

There, you'll pick out the host of your choice."

"Yes. Where are you going with this?"

"Do you know about the Dragon Song?"

Medula raised her glasses, alert. "Of course. A once blessed horn said to be imbued with the power to call dragons to its user's aid. Though it is now cursed such that it maddens dragons, drawing them to the user.

Such is the severity of the curse that the maddened dragons will even cross entire dimensional barriers to pursue the horn-blower.

As I recall, a fragment of that horn lies in your fourth trial quest."

Aldrich faintly smiled. "Tell me, would that work in your prison realm?"

Chapter 385: Dragon Strategy 1

"Ah, I see what you wish to accomplish," said Medula. "You plan on activating the Dragonsong in my prison realm, drawing the mad host of dragons there to wreak havoc on enemy forces. Provided, of course, that the dragons still exist and have not been annihilated by the presumed end of our realm."

"Whether or not your realm is fully gone or not doesn't matter here," said Aldrich.
"Because the dragons I want to call definitely do exist. They're right there in my fourth trial quest."

The fourth trial quest involved guiding a NPC called Renara to the top of an icy mountain where one half of the Dragonsong lay encased in a tomb of ice. The ascent to the mountain was filled with ice based threats and, most relevant, frost wyrms, drakes, and wyverns.

After passing by all the threats, she would take the Dragonsong, a family heirloom of hers, and become a permanent party member to call upon whenever needed.

The backstory behind the Dragonsong was that originally, it was gifted to a human hero as a sign of friendship.

The hero, known as Rendyr the Unbroken, earned the Dragonsong after he helped the dragons in sealing Kryos, Archdragon of Eternal Winter.

Kryos was pretty much the premiere villain for the dragons. An ancient millennial dragon far, far older than even the Death Lord. In fact, considering the fact that she was a powerful frost dragon herself, it was very likely she was descended from Kryos.

Kryos came from the Primal Age - a long, vast stretch of time where intelligent civilizations were nonexistent, the mortal races living in primitive tribes in fear of monsters and beasts.

In the Primal Age, dragons, not gods, were the stewards of the planet, with Archdragons being in charge of fundamental aspects of nature like the major elements.

Kryos himself was Archdragon of Frost and Decay, but he was not content with what he had. He wanted to create a new ice age, ushering in an age of dominance over all other dragon clans at the cost of a mass extinction event across the entire world of Elduin.

The other Archdragons, each representing their own element and leaders of clans themselves, worked together to defeat Kryos.

Kryos, however, had fortified himself with a spell known as [Beyond Claw and Eternity] which prevented any immortal or monster from killing or sealing him.

This rendered Kryos effectively impossible to defeat via draconic or godly hands. And no pathetic mortal tribesman came remotely close to even scratching Kryos's hide.

As a desperate last resort, the dragons created a test to take a worthy mortal champion. They lived atop Elantis, the highest mountain in Elduin, so high that it reached past the clouds and into the void of the stars itself.

They challenged mortals from all their races to send a worthy challenger to climb Elantis to commune with the dragons.

Many mortal tribes, ancient dwarves and elves and giants and so many others, sent the best of their best.

But in the end, it was a human that scaled the mountain.

Not because he was tougher or bigger or faster or smarter than any of them. But because he would not give up.

That hero was called Rendyr, later to be immortalized in history as Rendyr the Unbroken.

All the Archdragons gave Rendyr their elemental strength, temporarily making him the most powerful mortal of the time. Arguably to have ever existed across all of Elduin history.

Rendyr managed to defeat Kryos, though he lacked the strength to kill the ancient dragon. Instead, Kryos was sealed deep within the earth.

Afterwards, the dragons, depleted of their strength and numbers, returned to their own realm in a mass exodus called the Dragonfall, and ever since then, proper dragons were seen in far fewer numbers.

After the Dragonfall, Rendyr used the Dragonsong and his heroic status to found Elumia, the first and greatest kingdom of man whose denizens, in honor of the great mountain Elantis, named themselves Elumen.

This all took place roughly twenty thousand years before the actual start of the game. Over time, the Dragonsong passed hands many, many times, during which time Elumia crumbled apart into many different kingdoms of man that came and went.

Eventually, the Dragonsong was lost until three thousand years before the game, when a man called Rengar, blessed with faint traces of the original blood of Rendyr, found the mighty artifact and decided it to wield it with lofty ambitions of empire.

Rengar, with the aid of Carnassus, demon god of war, corrupted the divine artifact so that he could enslave all dragon type monsters he encountered to forcibly create a new Elumia. He subjugated kingdom after kingdom, melting the crowns of their monarchs and adding it to his own.

He took so many crowns that he eventually created an entire elaborate headpiece that went down from high above his head to his shoulders, earning him the title of 'Crowntaker'.

It was, however, secondary to Rengar's other title. The 'Lord of Slaughter'.

His conquests were bloody and fueled by Carnassus's endless desire for blood and carnage. Eventually, Carnassus completely corrupted Rengar, and it was evident that he would not stop his conquests until the entire world flowed red in the name of the war demon.

A coalition of gods led by Amara, the lady of light and life, killed Rengar and put an end to his ceaseless wars. The Dragonsong was lost again afterwards, not showing up until the player helped Renara reclaim the horn.

Or, to be more specific to the trial quest, one half of the horn.

The horn and its history was important because it tied in later. In the eighth trial quest, the player character completed the full Dragonsong. In the eleventh trial quest, right before the twelfth that involved the player necromancer defeating the Death Lord, they faced Kryos.

By the time of the eleventh quest, the player necromancer would have progressed the game's plotline enough to reach the end stages, when the Ceaseless Chaos, the final boss, unsealed Kryos and many other ancient threats.

The idea was that depending on the player class, you faced a different ancient threat for the eleventh trial quest. For warriors, it was Carnassus, the demon war god.

For mages, it was a corrupted resurrection of the Arcane Emperor, progenitor of the entire magic system.

And so on and so forth.

In the lore, Kryos actually broke free of the Chaos's control, massively weakening him, but even after the nerf, he was still a mighty level 100 boss that had dragonscales so ancient and tough that he was still essentially invulnerable to the player.

It took blowing the complete Dragonsong to weaken Kryos. The archdragon was too powerful for the Dragonsong to control, but the artifact still stripped him of his strength, weakening his scales to the point he could be reliably damaged.

It also removed his [Beyond Claw and Eternity] buff which Aldrich sorely needed to happen now.

In the game, Aldrich was a mortal necromancer, capable of slaying Kryos. But he was an immortal lich now. As long as he stayed a lich, he would never be able to kill Kryos.

Chapter 386: Dragon Strategy 2

But that was thinking way too far ahead. For now, Aldrich just needed to make sure his plans worked.

"Ah, so there are dragons in those quests of yours. I must remind you that I am not intimately aware of every little detail in those quests," said Medula. She clasped her hands together, forming a platform to rest her chin. "Only that they ended with you defeating us and leading the Lifelight here."

"How do you feel about that anyway? That I caused the end of everything here before?"

Medula shrugged casually. "Nothing much. It is like a faraway dream now. Any emotions I felt during that time are muted. And, even if they were not, I personally do not believe I would hold any grudge. We lost. That is that and only that."

"Surprisingly noble in defeat," said Valera. "I would have thought you far more vindictive than that."

"No point in harboring grudges. All that is is just a waste of mental energy, and there is very little in the form of grudges worth investing that much mental energy into." She tapped the side of her temple. "Well then, Usurper, I have heard your plan, and it should work."

Dragons are all vested with an innate ability to cross dimensional barriers. Much like demons, in fact. However, considering the lack of dragons in general, I suspect you are dealing with dragonkin.

Wyrms. Wyverns. Degenerated specimen."

"Correct."

"Their Dimensional Breaching capacity is weaker, then. They will not be able to breach the dimensional barrier between the Trial Quest and my prison realm. But the Dragonsong will temporarily amplify their breaching enough to escape the boundaries of the Trial Quest."

At that point, I can easily redirect them into the prison realm by briefly connecting the two, though it will be quite taxing on my magical energy. I will also require a precise notice of when this is happening and-,"

"No."

"No?" Medula paused, staring at Aldrich.

"I changed my mind. Activating the Dragonsong in the prison realm was my first plan, but there's the inherent flaw that insane dragons don't make good troops. I can lead them to my enemies, and if they're aggroed by other forces, they will respond, but this has some inherent unreliability to it.

I have a better way to do things. The good old fashioned necromancer's way.

I'll call them here, in the Necropolis itself, where they'll be killed. Afterwards, I raise them.

That way, I'll have a more reliable force to work with."

Medula raised an accusing brow. "YOU are going to be killing them, yes? After all, they are your responsibility." She stared at Aldrich, and he stared back at her in silence. She put a hand to her head in defeat. "No, why am I even asking such a question at this point. You are simply going to dump them here for us to deal with, no? That is exactly what you are going to do, hm?"

"You DO have top notch defenses," said Aldrich. "They made short work of my 'party' the last time I sent one here. I was so impressed that I'd like to request a repeat service."

Medula rubbed her forehead, annoyed. "Essentially what you are saying is that you will bring an entire flight of dragonkin to damage this realm."

"That is precisely what I'm saying."

"Your sheer audacity astounds me sometimes." Medula sighed. "Do you consider us a cleanup crew standing by at your convenience?"

You are aware that I am in control of the Necropolis right now, no? I have far less control than Mel, but it is still enough. What if I refuse to activate this tower's defenses? What if I choose to seal the dragonkin in your throne room? What if I make them your problem?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but weren't you the one to talk about how dragons have Dimensional Breaching?" said Aldrich. "With the Dragonsong's madness buff, I bet the dragonkin can bypass any seal you put up pretty damn easily."

This did make Aldrich wonder if there were dragons out there, in the vastness of the cosmos. Demons and dragons were similar in that they could both travel through realms, and Aldrich had already encountered an 'alien' demon in the form of Ikon.

What stopped there being 'alien' dragons? Or even the original Archdragons of the Dragonflight? Elden World never said where exactly the original dragons went, just that they left and never really looked back.

But maybe it was possible to encounter them again.

However, that possibility made it so that Aldrich would always have second or third thoughts before blowing the horn in the Alter realm. The Necropolis and prison realms were isolated, contained dimensions, but the Alter reality was massive.

The chance that the horn could draw some unwanted, powerful, maddened alien dragon seemed low, but it was not one Aldrich wanted to entertain.

Plus there was no real use for it out in the Alter world. There were no dragons, after all. None he knew of, anyway.

Aldrich briefly entertained the idea of whether the Dragonsong worked on Fafnir, the mercenary that could turn into a dragon. It made intuitive sense, but mechanically, it made no sense for it to work that way.

Fafnir was not a real dragon. He was just an Alterhuman who could mutate into something that looked like a dragon, but there was nothing magical about that transformation. In fact, it was more accurate to say he morphed into a giant serpent more than any typical fantasy looking dragon.

Yes, the fire breathing was there, but it was based on Ether powered combustion, not mana based magic.

"Fine. Fine. Mel did tell me to be patient with you." Medula leaned her head back, closing her eyes. "Yes, she told me to be patient. Yes, yes."

"Look, I wouldn't be doing this if I thought it would be a serious threat to the Necropolis," said Aldrich. "My initial plan WAS to use the Dragonsong in your prison realm and have you direct the dragonkin there, but things are just too convenient right now for me not to pass this opportunity up."

"Convenient?" Medula opened an eye, staring at Aldrich. "How?"

"You said the Death Lord took Rella's spot, didn't you?" Aldrich saw both Medula and Valera's eyes widen in recognition of where he was going with this. "That means Rella's free."

Last time I saw her, she was itching for a fight. Among other things. But mostly a fight. She's through and through the definition of a battle maniac.

Tell her I'm going to be bringing the fight to her."

Chapter 387: Dragon Strategy 3

Silence settled in the air with what Aldrich said. Valera, a seasoned warrior in her own right, and Medula, a millennial demon who had seen countless fighters live and die, both stood in a silence punctuated by awe.

That was the nature of Rella's strength. Overwhelmingly destructive in an awing way that was akin more to a natural disaster, an unstoppable hurricane or seismic annihilation more so than the movements of a mighty fighter.

Where one generated respect of technique and movement, the other ripped up terror from that deep, primal pit where all living beings knew to fear the wrath of nature. The fundamental instinct to stay alive, to survive – Rella's mere presence went against all of that.

"Rella?" said Fler'Gan, wondering what the big deal was.

"Right. You were locked in your study when she was around," said Aldrich.

"Indeed. My research into immortality took the greater part of two centuries. In that time, I removed myself from worldly affairs," said Fler'Gan.

"I'm sure the insanity didn't help either," said Valera.

"No, it did not. But I must say, it did help me shut out distractions."

On top of that, Aldrich realized, Fler'Gan had never been a part of his legion. In the game, it was impossible to raise Fler'Gan as he was technically a boss type monster with undead immunity. But it looked like the host of random resistances and immunities that being a boss gave, buffs that were there mostly for game balance issues to prevent cheese strategies, did not exist anymore.

Granted, boss type beings still had higher stats, but they did not have undead immunity anymore.

Because Fler'Gan had never been a part of Aldrich's legion, the scholar had never gotten to learn about Elduin after he decided to bury himself in his underground study.

"Rella is a demigod. Daughter of Rathos, highgod of thunder," said Aldrich.

"Rathos? Unsurprising. He must have sired an entire kingdom's worth of children in his long reign, particularly when one considers his lack of self-control involving women," said Fler'Gan. "But precious few mortals can ever inherit more than a mere droplet of divine blood."

"Rella is special," said Medula. "More than half the blood that flows through her veins is divine Ichor. She is a one in a millennium anomaly. In past times, she would have been hailed as a hero among heroes, destined for nothing but greatness."

Alas, the god factors she inherited made her more monster than hero."

God factors were the domains that deities represented or governed over. They could range from elements to locations to concepts like lust or war.

In the case of Rathos, as a high god, he had multiple god factors, many of which were contrasts to each other. He was the god of war and heroism, life giving rain and destructive thunder, carnal lust and bloodlust. He was a warrior god meant to show that men could be both noble and brutal in times of hardship.

"How many factors? An ordinary demigod would struggle to manage one," said Fler'Gan.

"Three. War, thunder, and bloodlust," said Medula.

"Three. Quite astounding. And all the 'negative' ones, too," said Fler'Gan. "Rathos in his rages could topple entire countries. If this spawn of his is anything like that, then I can see now where the awe is warranted."

"It isn't awe here. It's concern. In the main timeline I was a part of, Rella killed Rathos," said Aldrich.

"She slew her father? The highgod? Lord of the Elumen pantheon?" Fler'Gan's three eyes narrowed down in disbelief.

"Yes, and Rella isn't the best at controlling her powers," said Aldrich. "She doesn't so much fight as she's sent in a direction and everything in that path gets annihilated, regardless of friend or foe. She can handle her god factors, but like you said, without full divine blood, there's always going to be side effects."

"In Rella's case, this manifests in a particular instability of the mind when engaging in battle," said Medula.

"A berserker's rage," said Valera. "It is similar to my Reversion."

"I should say it is far superior," countered Medula. "Vampiric Reversion and Rella's Godrage are similar mental debuffs, but your clan's bloodline renders you into a brute forced beast bereft of any access to your knightly training.

Rella's Godrage not only enhances the powers she inherited from her godfactors, but it does nothing to quell the execution of her techniques.

This makes her remarkably deadly to all our foes, but at the same time, a tremendous risk as well."

Medula rubbed her chin. "One that I am having second thoughts entertaining. If Rella slips into a godfactor induced rage, it will take a tremendous amount of effort to stop her."

"How did you get her to stop usually?" asked Aldrich. He had only ever seen the Necropolis through the lens of an enemy. Hence, he knew Rella as a massive threat with large AoE and targeting that did not distinguish between friend and foe well.

But he never really gave a thought about the logistics of trying to field a living force of nature like Rella.

"Prevention, not reaction, like with most problems, is key. Mel fights her occasionally to stop her bloodlust from building up excessively, or we prevent her from fighting to the point she falls into Godrage," said Mel. "Elsewise, if she does slip into her godfactor induced rage, there are three main ways we halt her.

One, Mel again fights her and subdues her. This causes untold amounts of destruction and removes two of the Necropolis's strongest fighting forces. A highly unwanted situation.

Two, Wai'ki communes with her soul and calms her. This is inherently risky as it requires Wai'ki to physically come in contact with Rella, and Rella is powerful enough to kill Wai'ki in a few strikes.

Three, I cast [Outworld Imprisonment] on her. In a void of nothingness, Rella eventually calms down. it is how she was subdued when she was a child, thrown into the deepest depths of a thoroughly barren dungeon."

Medula stared accusingly at Aldrich. "But of course, if I am saving the spell for your plans, then I cannot very well use it for Rella, no? You may think Rella's godrage is only our problem, but if she begins her rage in your throne room, you can bid farewell to that throne of yours.

And with it, potential access to your trial quests and progress in Usurping this tower."

"That's if she gets into her rage," said Aldrich. "I doubt Rella's going to get worked up enough over a bunch of dragonkin. At best, the strongest of them will be level 50."

Meanwhile, Rella was a level 90 boss with cheat tier abilities granted from her divine blood. Her resistances were jacked sky high and she rocked a complete immunity to fire and lightning. The fire immunity alone was an absurdly good passive to have as an undead, but that just scratched the surface of her powers.

Her pupils, like those in full blooded gods, were divine runes that had permanent Truesight. Not only that, but they were runes of destruction inherited from her father,

containing Rathos's signature ability to, with but a gaze, smite any existences below level 40 into smoldering dust with few exceptions.

She had her necrolightning as her most powerful magical ability, which she could spam freely and across massive areas with seemingly infinite capability due to her divine blood. Ichor, the life essence of the gods, was essentially like a fusion reactor where the average being ran on a regular old gas based engine.

Entities with ichor flowing through them could multiply their mana pool and mana regeneration tremendously. Any mana they absorbed from the environment was multiplied several times fold where average mortals actually absorbed environmental mana at a net loss.

But it was in her physical abilities that she shone. Her physical stats were tremendously high, and she made expert use of them with a class as a Monk. Due to her war godfactor, she had access to a variety of mighty powerful martial skills that included things like the [Skysplitter], a blow that could split mountains in half, and, most deadly of all, the [Godfall] that involved an insanely high powered throw followed by a heaven and earth shattering barrage of necrolightning.

[Godfall], as its name indicated, was sufficiently strong enough to kill gods, the strongest of whom hovered from level 90 to 100.

That was to say, throwing Rella against dragonkin that could not even break level 60 was like tossing a fully trained Imugi cyberninja against a crowd of shitty blue grade ARMA police. A complete slaughter.

"If the dragonkin are not beyond level 50, then I can see this working," said Medula. "But even then, depending on their numbers, the time of combat engagement may be high, and that is the most important factor in determining whether Rella falls into her rage or not."

"I'll make sure she doesn't."

"And I am supposed to take your word for this?"

"You're not supposed to. But you'll end up having to. Unless you want to waste Necropolis forces on the dragonkin. I reckon it'll be much easier to have Rella mop them up."

"...Fine," Medula conceded after thinking the situation through for a minute. "I will trust your competence for this."

"As you should," said Valera. "My dear's competence has not failed me."

"Let's hope his generosity extends to the likes of me," said Medula, sarcasm faintly etched into her voice.

"Generosity or not, the end result is the same: you'll get your body sooner rather than later," said Aldrich. "And with that, your freedom. Now then, assuming you have no further complaints, I'm going to excuse myself here."

"What? No further favors to request of me?" said Medula, the sarcasm growing stronger in concentration.

Aldrich ignored her tone and got up, patting his suit of dust and turning his back on her. "Nope. I'm done here, and I have a dinner appointment that's calling my name."

Chapter 388: Heist Intrusion

"Y'all ready?" Clint said, his massive body dwarfed by an enormous rock pillar he stood behind. He was dressed from head to toe in a brown nomad cloak that billowed in wild, whistling winds.

The winds, when scrutinized closely, had small iridescent flakes in them, creating ever so faintly shimmering trails that indicated that they were packed with raw ether from a geostorm.

This was the tail end of the geostorm that was just about done passing over Meteor Labs.

"Ready to blow some shit up, yeah," said Stella, grinning like mad under her own nomad cloak. Behind her were the Blackwater students Tox, Ace, and Alexis.

"Hell yeah, that's the spirit!" roared Clint, though with the loud winds, his voice was only audible through the comm-link earpieces everyone had. Right in front of Clint was Kris, the techno from the Phantom nomad tribe, Diamondback, and Alan and Falco.

"Pipe down, Clint. We're due for action in just ten minutes," said Diamondback. He put his hand against his ear tentatively. "Looks like audio's clear. Kris, if anyone tries infiltrating us, we're counting on you to set up a tough firewall."

"Yeah, you can count me," said Kris.

"And me, if it comes down to it," said Alan. "I've got a neural operating system with smartlink capability. If Kris goes down, I can step up as a Netguard."

Most earpieces these days were compact temporary implants that attached directly into the ear canal to prevent getting dislodged physically, but this sensitive placement,

though safer from physical risk, faced greater danger from a techno infiltrating the piece and frying it in the ear to very unpleasant effect.

It was thus imperative that a proper techno acted as a Netguard, someone who could directly link with the earpieces via neural link to protect their network.

Out of everyone here, only Kris and Alan were technos capable of neural interfacing. Showed in their appearance too. They were the only metalheads as well, with Alan packing tons of firepower in his cybernetic body while Kris's thinner build and cool-weave black bodysuit indicated he was geared towards maximizing his operational capacity in Cyberspace.

Cybernetics were commonplace, but not as much as the availability of the technology would suggest. Many Alters like Mutants were not compatible with traditional cyberware while tough Augmenters had skin and body parts that were too tough to operate on, not to mention if you were naturally strong, there was no need to replace flesh with metal.

Hence, technos with proper neural interfacing were extremely valuable in practically any profession both legal and illegal.

"I'd rather you didn't risk your mind in Cyberspace," said Diamondback. "But Kris, give the kid access. If by some chance you do go down, it's nice to have backup."

"I'm a Phantom, you know?" said Kris, a little miffed. "Best of the best on this side of the whole damn continent."

"I acknowledge that," said Diamondback. "But nobody is infallible. Do what I tell you. I hired you, after all."

"Yeah, got it," said Kris. He nodded to Alan, pale blue goggles lighting up.

Alan's red eyes flashed as he received information mentally from Kris.

"Got access," said Alan. He whistled. "Holy, the encryption your working on is top notch. It's just as good as the military grade stuff I got a chance to work with once. Phantoms don't play around, I see."

"We don't. When we say we're the some of the best dark technos around, we aren't bullshitting," said Kris. "Hope you don't play around either, kid."

"Won't have to if you don't mess up, yeah?" Alan fired back.

Clint laughed. "This kid's got some balls, hah! I like it."

"I got balls too, boss!" said Falco. He eagerly held onto his gun, a colorful green laser-rifle from Aztech, a firearm company known for their energy weapons and decorative flair.

The gun was spray painted with red wing patterns on top of that, showing that Falco had put quite a bit of love and time into it. "I'll show you when we start blastin' em!"

"When did I become your boss, kid? Your boss is always gonna be your daddy. Though I do respect the spirit."

"Not my dad. He's gotten too old and too safe. He'd never take a fight like this. A fight that really matters. All he does, all I remember him doing is just running around the Wastes, mapping and selling info, making deals with corporations and mercs and whoever.

He never stands up for himself anymore. He always takes the easy way out. He isn't like you, the Unbreakable," said Falco, quietly. He looked up at Clint with bright eyes, and it was obvious to everyone there that he saw Clint as the man he looked up to, not his father.

"Kid, there's a hell of a lot to respect about your pa. For one, the fact that he could even get hard enough to make you in his wrinkly old age, heh - guess all that Qi training in China was actually useful after all." Clint laughed.

"He isn't standing up for himself, he's standing up for his tribe," said Diamondback. "There's a difference. A difference that shows itself in the fact that the Hawks have had the fewest casualties out of any nomad tribe across the entire U.S. in the past decade.

A difference I sometimes wish this cinderblock for brains would figure out." Diamondback gruffly nodded at Clint.

"I got you to figure that out, heh, no?" Clint chuckled, but his laughter was cut short when his ears twitched. They grew larger, pointed, bat-like. His brows furrowed.

"What is it?" said Diamondback.

"The hell? Sounds like an aircraft," said Clint.

"Aircraft?" Tox shook her head. "Not possible, old man. Those big ears of yours must be tweaking here. Any aircraft wouldn't be able to land through a geostorm."

"But a HV can," said Clint.

HVs, or hover vehicles as they were known in long form, were aereal vehicles that relied on anti-gravity engines to hover. They were slower than typical etherite-fuel engines, but they compensated with far superior stability in rough conditions.

"An HV?" Alan questioned. "Anti-grav engines have massive energy requirements. Out here, in the Wastes, you'd be hard pressed to find charging stations. Any HV out here has to be rocking either a military or industrial grade battery.

"Getting a physical visual will be impossible through the dust clouds and winds," said Diamondback. "Not to mention risky. The storm hides us from any HV sensors, but if we try to make eye contact with it, there's a threateningly high chance it'll spot us too if it's geared with decent optics.

Need to get a remote visual.

Kris. Cyberspace dive. Figure out what's going on."

"Geostorm energy surges are still in the air," said Kris, putting his black gloved hand in front of him, touching the little slivers of gleaming rainbow energy.

They crackled and fizzled chaotically at his touch. "I can dive, but my connection to Cyberspace is going to be spotty. It'll be hard for me to analyze the HV to any high level of detail.

At best, I might be able to make out a general outline, maybe a company it's from."

"Don't need high level. Any information is better than nothing," said Diamondback.

"Understood. Diving. Secure my position." Kris sat and leaned against the rock pillar, making himself comfortable for the dive. Once he dove, it would basically be like as if his soul was sucked out his body.

He would be rendered completely defenseless in Realspace.

Like all Phantoms, Kris had a jaw-shaped mask that covered the lower half of his face. He pressed a button on it, and it hissed, releasing pressurized, cooled air through his mouth and nose to prevent his brain from overheating.

He grew limp, head hanging low as his consciousness floated to Cyberspace.

"Perimeter," said Diamondback.

Stella, Tox, Ace, and Alexis responded promptly, circling around Kris and securing his position.

"Over here." Clint guided Alan and Falco, the two newbies, behind him where they could huddle behind his huge frame for cover in case of attack. "Make sure to keep a look out where everyone else ain't lookin'-,"

"I know," said Alan. "I've downloaded military training software and played through it."

"Yeah, I knew that too," said Falco, though not very convincingly. It was very obvious that Falco had never really been a part of a big operation before, which did beg the question why he had an Aztech gun, as Aztech was actually quite high end.

Probably all for show.

"Damn, all right, y'all kids learn so quick these days. Shit, when I was your ages, I barely knew how to wipe my ass right, hah!" said Clint.

"Quiet, all of you," said Diamondback.

Several tense minutes passed.

Kris shuddered before he came to, rubbing his hand on his head. The glowing blue in his goggles darkened a few shades.

"As expected, I couldn't get much. The encryption on the HV's one tough motherfucker too. Even if there wasn't a geostorm, I'd have trouble cracking it," said Kris.

"Definitely military or industrial grade, then," noted Alan.

"What else?" said Diamondback. "Any identifying markers? Is it tied to a company?"

"Yeah," said Kris. "Imugi."

Chapter 389: Heist Intrusion 2

"Imugi?" Diamondback stiffened up, his whole body language tensing and radiating perceived threat. Clint, in response, lost the languid casualness that marked all his movements, straightening his own posture,

And if Clint, the most loose out of everyone there, was reacting like this, then something was off.

"That's not just high end. It's high-high end," said Alan under his breath.

"Rich bastards," said Tox.

"Imugi? We-we really are in the big leagues, huh?" said Falco nervously.

"How many HVs?" said Diamondback.

"My ears only picked up one," said Clint.

"Just one," confirmed Kris. "I actually have some of Imugi's ID database data, but this isn't registering on it."

"That data's from the big heist y'all Phantoms pulled ten years ago, though, ain't it?" said Clint. "The one that got yer boss in her shiny big wheel fortress."

"Imugi prides itself in its craftsmanship, no matter how long it takes," said Kris. "It's quite admirable, honestly, in this era of mass produced goods and a race to the bottom for the cheapest.

Built with precision. Made to last.

Any HV is going to be atleast Century-class, and Imugi produces maybe one or two of that caliber of good a year."

Imugi categorized its products under a time based ranking system. Annual to Decade to Century to Millennium based on the old Korean myth that an imugi, an infant dragon, grew to full maturation after a thousand years.

The megacorp made its broad profits from Annual to Decade class ware, but Century and Millennium was where they poured in the most time and effort, so much so that, as Kris pointed out, only a few of that caliber were ever made in a year.

For Millennium class vehicles or weapons, only one was made every decade or so, and these were veritable national treasures.

"Shit, if only we had Net connection," said Diamondback. "It'd be possible to find out the handful of Century and Millennium class vehicles produced since 2110 and potentially trace them to an owner."

"I have that info backed up," said Kris. "Accessing now..."

"Even recent Imugi stuff?" said Clint.

"Yeah. After our heist, Imugi's amped up its security to high heavens and back, but they're not off our hit list just yet. Z tells us to keep track of Imugi news in case there's something worth klepping," said Kris. He looked at Clint hopefully. "And, provided we get a powerful backer looking for a new shiny to have. Even better if that backer is tough themselves."

"Heh, gotta pass on that. Imgui ain't my style. My trusty ol' ride's got a soft spot in my heart that no fancy corpotech's gonna take over," said Clint.

"Suit yourself." Kris nodded. "Hm. Only HVs that have been produced in the past ten years are the Sanzuwu and the Seiryu. The Seiryu was a commission piece for the Japanese PM, so we can rule that out.

Sanzuwu, though, ten of those were made."

"I remember that," said Alan. "It was all over the mechanic boards. Anytime Imugi so much as farts, the boards get in an uproar about what new thing they're making and who they're selling to."

Most of the Sanzuwu were snapped up by government peeps and AA higher ups across the world, no?"

"Seven of the ten, yes," said Kris. "But three were 'kept in storage' or 'decommissioned'. All code word for sold to underworld buyers. Here, I'll project a diagram for reference."

From Kris's goggles, a holographic image of the Sanzuwu appeared. It looked like a three pointed star with a golden, orb-shaped body with three long, protruding wings.

Details about the Sanzuwu showed up in various screens, detailing the specs of the engine, weapons in its three wings, shielding capacity, and so on and so forth.

"Underworld? You sure?" Stella frowned. "Don't figure the ordinary villain or street merc's got the creds for this kinda gear."

"Don't expect it to be with high end mercs either," said Tox. "Aside from maybe the top 10 of the Killgrid. You have to look way, way high up in the Underworld for that type of money."

"Maybe Fafnir is here" Ace pointed out.

"Impossible" said Alexis. "I made sure to go through all our intel with Casimir before this. Fafnir's still stationed at Blackwater."

"Then it's likely a Trident executive," said Diamondback. He grimaced. "Shit, of all the times for an exec to be here, it has to be now. And why? Our intel suggested that Meteor Labs ran near completely independently to keep their image disassociated from criminal funding."

If this is an exec, it'd be the first time since the labs were established twenty years ago that anyone of that level showed up."

"Nah. I got a real good idea who it is," said Clint. His tone was somber, so unlike his usual pep that everyone turned to stare at him. He was looking down, remembering. "Y'all got a good idea of why I'm called the Unbreakable?"

"Nobody with a proper head on their shoulders in the underworld doesn't," said Tox. "Though there's probably a good number of folks down here with screws loose."

"That's right, everyone knows!" said Falco. "Your pa took you on a heist to steal a bot from Bushido, things went wrong, your pa died, and you took it on yourself to get vengeance." He spoke with reverence, like he was recounting a myth. "Then the Bushido Break happened. January 4th, 2100. You went all the way to Japan, knocked on Bushido tower's doors, and tore the whole damn thing down by yourself!"

"Yeah. That, I did," said Clint. "Ain't somethin' to be too proud of. Most of the people in that tower were ordinary folk. Janitors, receptionists, researchers, normal Suits tryna feed their family, fathers, mothers, young sons and daughters that studied their asses off to get there - they all died when I blew that place up."

Falco's smile faded, and his eager energy simmered down.

"I don't know how I did it to this day. Fightin' all those people. Mercs, villains, and heroes. Worst thing is, it don't even feel like I did it. All that rampagin', it feels so distant when I try to remember, like I was in a dream and someone else was pilotin' me.

My powers just exploded and sorta encased me, I can't explain the feeling well, but I wasn't all there.

Went there to satisfy my vengeance and left with nothing but a bad dream. Funny how things work, huh?" Clint smiled wistfully and shrugged.

"Anyway, those of you familiar with the underworld know that Bushido was the Japanese prong of the Trident at that time. Cobbled together from Yakuza's banding together to make a corp.

After I tore down the corp building and killed most of the board, including the CEO, the whole company went to shit. It dissolved. Got snapped up by Park Jin Woo's rise when he got a hold of Yeolju and rebranded both into Imugi.

Their mercenaries, or warriors as they call themselves, didn't want to work with Jin Woo, so their leaders, the Seven Swords of the time, broke off and turned into the new Japanese prong, though instead of being a big corp, they're now more in the shadows.

No corporate dealings. Just an in-house merc force.

Ever since then, the Swords have had a grudge on me, though after the last attack, they've backed up a bit. Guess they figured killin' my wife and losin' three of theirs was enough to settle the score.

That last fight was five years ago, but I still remember every detail as clear as day. One of the Swords, the fifth Sword, he piloted this on the day of the attack."

Clint pointed at the Sanzuwu projection.

Chapter 390: Heist Intrusion 3

"Shit...one of the seven freaking swords?" said Tox. Her lavender skin rippled like jello, transferring her shock from head to toe. "All the swords are practically freaking legends in merctalk."

"And we aren't?" said Alexis, her arms crossed, confidence imbued in the straight way she carried herself. "Come on. We're Blackwater. We were meant to train and replace those legends."

"Key word is 'train'," said Tox. "Ace is the only one here who can put up a real fight against them."

"And I'm willing to fight," said Ace. He clenched his fists, a sheen of faint blue energy covering it. "I've always been ready. Meteor Labs has been calling my name for ten years now. All those experiments, the pain, the suffering – I'm going to pay them back for it, fifth sword or not."

"Ease up, son," said Diamondback. Unlike when he talked with Alan or especially Falco, his tone was not patronizing. It had more respect in it, perhaps in recognition of Ace's greater strength and training experience. "I get how you feel. Half this crew's got a grudge against the Trident in some way, shape or form."

I'm the same. The attack on the Spearhorns five years back took my brother from me. But move with vengeance in your body, it might give you a rush, a booster in your legs, but it'll cloud your eyes." He tapped his mind. "Your mind."

"Then what do you propose?" said Stella. "This heist's danger level just got notched up a hell of a lot. On that 1 to 5 rating scale of yours, I reckon it's a fat five by now."

"I would say a four," said Diamondback. "The fifth sword isn't at his best."

"I injured him," said Clint. "A serious injury, too. The Fifth Sword, Shuten Doji, he metabolizes alcohol and converts it into a variety of powers. I managed to introduce a virus that wrecked his liver. He got away with his life that day, but his powers aren't what they used to be, and with how amped up my evolutions were by then, that virus isn't anything that modern medicine can cure."

"Which is confirmed by his recent activity," said Diamondback. "Of which there is none."

"None until now," Tox said. "Injured or not, doesn't change the fact that a sword is in there."

"Doesn't change anything!" said Falco, grinning more nervously than anything else. "We can add 'taking down a sword' to our resumes."

"Dude, do you even have a resume?" Tox stared at Falco like she was saying 'are you serious right now?'. "This is like if some homeless crackhead decided to apply for CEO of a Fortune corp. Shit, at least the crackhead'll just get laughed at and rejected, you do this, you just fucking die."

"Ain't no treasure without danger," said Falco.

"Hey, that sounds like me," said Clint.

Falco nodded. "If I want to lead the Hawks, I need their respect. Just like how you put all the Spearhorns under your banner with the Bushido Break, I want to do something big just like that. Something that'll make everyone in my tribe look up at me."

"I don't know," said Alan, the other newbie here. "This is...risky. We only have around an hour before the storm's cover lifts, and if we aren't out by then, the chances of reinforcements coming shoots up high."

Won't be conventional personnel, but if Meteor Labs is that important to the Trident, I doubt they would hesitate sending tough flying supers our way.

If the fifth sword is there, the chances of this operation taking over an hour goes up exponentially. If reinforcements get here before we can reach the vaults and the Kryptic, things will get dicey quick."

"Willing to weigh risks. Now that's what I like to see on a newbie," said Diamondback.

"I want to make the Trident hurt, but if I die during it, then there's no point," said Alan. "I want to be alive at the end of it all. Standing over their rubble."

"Wisely put," said Diamondback. He addressed everyone broadly. "As it stands, Alan's risk assessment is correct. The fifth sword isn't an impossible obstacle to overcome, especially with Clint. But the issue is the time it'll take to deal with him."

"Dunno how much weaker he's gotten," said Clint. "But he had an impressive healin' factor last I fought him. It's a real slog wearin' him down."

"But the benefit to continuing with this heist have increased significantly as well," said Diamondback. "We now have the chance to take out one of the seven swords. More than a handful of swords will be present in Blackwater, and considering the fifth being here, it's likely he's going to be stationed there as well."

Breaking the fifth here will mean dealing with one less sword during the Blackwater attack."

"I'm of the mind to keep goin' with this," said Clint. "Score ain't settled with me yet. And, like DB said, takin' out a sword now saves us the trouble later. Plus, I'm confident I can kick this guy's ass properly this time around.

What about you folks?" He nodded over to Stella and the Blackwater students.

"Stella, I'm gonna defer this one to you," said Tox. "You're the one the boss put in charge of us, after all."

"Yeah," said Ace, and Alexis nodded in agreement.

"I'm going to try and reach out to Thanatos first," said Stella.

Clint nodded. "Try to contact Thanatos if you can. If he wants you to pull out, I'll pull out too."

"There's Geostorm based interference all around us," said Kris. "How are you going to manage that?"

"Uh, it just works," said Stella. She put a hand to the side of her head and closed her eyes, sending out a distress signal telepathically to Aldrich.

Ordinary units in the Legion barring boss category beings like Fler'Gan or Okeanos or Chosen like Valera could not freely communicate with Aldrich, but every unit could send distress signals, at which point Aldrich could manually open telepathic channels to engage in conversation.

"The hell...?" Stella's forehead wrinkled in concern. "He ain't picking up. This ain't like him. If any one of us sent a distress signal, he'd be right up in our heads in an instant."

"Does sound like what he'd do, OCD as he is," said Tox. "Though I do like the detail oriented guys..."

"This is kinda different, too. I can feel my signal reaching out, but it's not getting to him, as if he's somewhere our minds can't touch at all," said Stella.

"By now, Thanatos should be here in realspace," said Alexis. She and the others knew that every so often, Aldrich could disappear to a different dimension, but he usually told them decently accurate timeframes for his disappearance to make sure there was no confusion. "He had a dinner appointment, and he's not the type to flake on those."

"Good. I hate ghosters," said Tox.

"Did something happen to him?" said Ace.

"Well if it did, ain't no way to know," said Stella. She took in a deep breath. "Meaning the decision's entirely my own. Damn, I hate leading teams. Last time I led one, I got everyone killed."

"Not entirely reassuring here, sis," said Tox.

"Don't worry. I'm a helluva lot stronger now," said Stella, flexing her arm. She nodded. "Let's do this. This was an important mission, Thanatos made that clear to me. And he's trustin' us to see it through even without his input."

We need that Kryptic above anything else. Might as well treat the fifth sword as a bonus to slap on top of it."

"I better get paid a bonus worth it," said Tox. "Wouldn't mind a date either."

"Yeah, you try and get a date from that busy ass schedule of his. And from Val too," said Stella. "I'll make sure to think of something for your obituary."

"C'mon why keep reminding me? Let a girl dream..."

"Good. Then we're all of one mind," said Clint. He cracked his neck. "Let's get this shit started."

Chapter 391: The Dinner Incident 1

Aldrich sat in the cushiony confines of a luxury private airjet. It was ARMA Black-grade, the color designated for specialty commissions based manufacturing for higher end clientele. ARMA was leagues behind Imugi as far as the higher end of their tech went, but the thing about ARMA was that it had no real pride.

It did not care whether it sold to the lowest beggar or the richest wealthmonger. It tried its best to satisfy both. Granted, there was such a thing as stretching yourself out too thin, and if ARMA had focused on trying to satisfy everyone on every socioeconomic rung, it would have failed long ago.

ARMA succeeded because it knew how to hedge its bets for expansion. It knew when to fill in power vacuums at the right moments.

Its Black grade department started up five years ago when the leading high end war manufacturer in the states, Aztech, went into a decline after a power struggle between heirs that split the company down in two, severing its firearms and vehicle departments.

And now, its new superhero group, the Guardians as it was called, was getting more traction in light of the AA's recent decline due to its mishandling of the Locus Raids and the Judicata attack.

"We're bringing power back to the people!" Tychus, CEO of ARMA, bellowed out with a confident grin slapped across his chubby face. He spoke from the confines of ceiling mounted telescreen that Aldrich paid half-attention to.

A sea of reporters surrounded Tychus outside ARMA tower, located right in the heart of Neo-York, the biggest city in the United States. "Ain't no more will the ordinary joe be shit outta luck when their neighborhood assigned hero's off doing something else. With the Guardians, based on your subscription tier, you're guaranteed a hero to come to your aid, no matter what! Ain't no need to rely on a big, faceless agency anymore!"

Tychus droned on, and Aldrich shrugged. He had looked in briefly at Tychu's new league and found it less than revolutionary.

The main marketing tactic, it seemed, was to capitalize on people's desire for security. Guaranteed security. Something the masses rabidly wanted after the Locus raids.

Even with scientists and governments reporting the retreat of variants, the masses were still terrified, scarred by recent losses by an attack that had no equal for over fifty years.

The system Tychus proposed was consumer friendly, with the lowest Guardian package, the so called 'One Star' package, being as cheap as 200 hundred credits a month.

The tradeoff was, of course, that the hero response time guarantee was longer, being at thirty minutes compared to two minutes for the highest Five Star package.

The packages could also be upgraded with medical and evacuation add-ons that added medical and evac support along with the heroes.

Provided Tychus could cultivate enough hero talent to pull this off, the idea was to individualize hero security and give everyone a fighting chance.

The AA-Panopticon system focused on broad public safety with a perfect willingness to sacrifice the lives of the few for the many or, in many cases, the lives of the poor many versus the wealthier, more 'valuable' few.

Aldrich wondered what Tychus had up his sleeve to make this work, though. He would need an absolutely massive hero network on top of an incredibly refined surveillance system to make good on his promised response times.

But given Tychus's recent track record, it was safe to say that he was not moving without a somewhat stable plan in mind.

Regardless, it did not relate to Aldrich much. It was something he just kept up with more out of interest than anything.

"Ah, I see, so it is like assigning a guardian knight to everyone?" said Valera. She was seated beside Aldrich, a glass of complimentary red wine in her hand from an extensive cellar located within the walls of the jet.

She looked up at the telescreen with interest, acclimating rapidly day by day to the technology of the new world, though no doubt, her mind melding with Aldrich by being his Chosen helped her adjust too.

"Basically, yeah, that's one way to think about it," said Aldrich.

"It seems woefully unrealistic." Valera shrugged. "Not all lives are worth the merit of a trained fighter."

"That's exactly the line of thought that's giving Tychus support. Granted, it's reactionary support for now, but who knows how it'll end up. Everyone wants to feel special. Protected. It's only natural."

"But what is natural is not always what is right."

"True." Aldrich sat in thought for a bit. He did not partake in any of the snacks or drinks on board because he had Volantis on him. "Like most things, there needs to be a middle ground. Control versus freedom."

"I do not know. Perhaps it is because of my heritage, but I have always believed in hierarchy. There are those that are special, and those that are not. Those that are high, and those that are low," said Valera. She swirled her wine about in her glass. "The special controls the flow of the mundane. The high dominates the low. The few reigns over the many."

"That's how things are now," said Aldrich. "Panopticon at the top, then the governments and corps below them."

"I am still not familiar with the system too much. It seems so overly complicated. I do wonder." Valera cocked her head and looked at Aldrich with a mischievous glint in her red eyes. "What if we cut down the 'few' even more? What if the 'few' became 'one'? Would that not lead to the most stability? The most order?"

"It depends on who that 'one' is," said Aldrich, but he knew exactly what she was insinuating with this. She wanted him to be the one. The one to control the world. And, with the way things were progressing, it was looking increasingly like he had to assume the reigns.

Granted, he did not know how to feel about it himself. He was not repulsed by the idea as some would be, nor was he chomping at the bit to get at the reigns. He stood firmly in the middle.

His human conditioning, starting all the way from when he was a kid, when his parents taught him what heroism was meant to be, told him that something about the idea of one man seeking world domination was inherently villainous, inherently wrong.

But then there was his current self. A self-conditioned by years of reality and now, Lichdom. When he saw humans as units, resources, it felt obvious that one high mind was the most efficient.

"I know exactly who the 'one' is," said Valera. She smiled at Aldrich, her expression naturally seductively convincing, perhaps because she was a vampire.

"I know. I do too," said Aldrich. He loved and respected his parents, but ultimately, he did not share their ideals. He was his own man. No, not a man anymore. Something greater. He had no illusions about being the one to rule the world; it was something that he would do if the opportunity arose.

"But I'm working with what I have. If I could be the one, I would, but I can't very well decide to do that right now without making an enemy out of everyone. So, for now, cooperation it is."

"Soon, that will change," said Valera, nodding. She clenched a fist in front of her, showcasing her resolve. "And I will do everything in my power to make sure that change happens."

Aldrich nodded in response. She was referring to the Blackwater attack, where the machine heart was. Once he got that, the idea of ruling the world separated from the realm of dream and into the plane of reality.

Granted, the machine heart alone was not going to be enough, but it would be one big step forward.

Aldrich still felt the weight of responsibility, of bearing the fates of many, on his shoulders, but he was a being of duty. He stepped up to the challenge at hand, and he never, ever broke down. If he had even an inkling of that kind of weakness, he would have shattered years ago when his parents died.

If he was to bear the fate of the whole world, then so be it.

'This whole villain-world domination talk is cool and all, but I'm interrupting here to let you know that the landing's soon, said V. Her voice crackled right into Aldrich's brain. It was no ordinary ear commlink, but a modified version of a device called a technolink.

Technolinks were the hardcore version of ear commlinks, being tiny computers surgically grafted into the body permanently where normal commlinks could easily be slipped in and out once they were deactivated with a specific electric current.

They were meant to be used by heroes, villains, or mercs who had a dedicated techno to support them. The link acted as an access gate from which their support techno could directly operate, utilizing their powers and techno abilities remotely.

This proved necessary for V as she physically could not be with Aldrich most of the time, needed as she was under Haven's control tower to maintain net security.

In Aldrich's case, the technolink was grafted into his skull as any flesh implanted cyberware just disintegrated when he transformed into his lich form.

'That was quick,' noted Aldrich. 'Just an hour to fly from Haven to Neo-Seattle.'

'That's a high powered airjet for ya,' said V. 'Anyways, I've confirmed that nobody's been tracking this jet in realspace or cyberspace. The flight's been completely on the down-low. In other words, you're free to enjoy your dinner without any peeping toms.'

Unless you consider me one.'

'Not at all. You're welcome in my head anytime,' said Aldrich. He rapped at the white painted metal walls of the jet. In response, large strips of the walls seemingly turned transparent, showing a crystal clear image of the outside.

He was atop a landing pad that was part of the much larger roof of an enormous mansion.

Bart's mansion.

Chapter 392: The Dinner Incident 2

"Nice place," Aldrich commented. Even on the mansion's rooftop, it was easy to tell how impressive it was.

Six stories tall, judging by how far up they were, with the mansion grounds decorated with a pristinely well-maintained green lawn peppered with elaborate fountain statues that housed hidden sentry turrets.

'Yeah, that's Springvale for you,' said V. "Insane what they can do. They're basically a biocorp, warcorp, and rentcorp packed all in one."

Springvale was an elite company meant for the elites, focusing on developing select real estate to create playgrounds for the ultra-wealthy.

Where the vast majority of people nowadays lived packed in mega-apartments or, if they were lucky, corporate sponsored housing, the ultra-wealthy could afford to separate themselves from the air of the poor and the bustle of walled cities.

Springvale mansions were created in key areas outside of walled cities where variant activity was relatively low.

Once a patch of suitable wild area was identified, company militia and bulldozers destroyed everything in its wake before the terraculture department re-seeded the land with life, though this time with fauna and flora that suited an aesthetic, not variants looking for their next kill.

Bart, it seemed, had not been stingy about his Springvale mansion. Aside from the mansion itself, the property extended to a radius of ten miles, creating an artificial forest ecosystem.

At its borders were AV (Anti-Variant) signal towers and trees and rocks that were mechs and turrets in disguise to gun down any variant or thug that still tried to approach.

"So this is like a lord's manor, is it?" said Valera, peering out at the mansion also. "Not as surprising as I thought it would be. It is tall, big, and isolated from peasants. It seems that across realms, some things do not change."

"I guess it's just human nature. Hierarchy, like you said," said Aldrich.

'Hoho, I am eager to feast!' Volantis's voice boomed in Aldrich's head. 'You do not know how much willpower it took simply to not snatch the alcohol lying before me.'

'Just hold on a little,' said Aldrich. 'And this isn't a feast. This is a proper dinner. I'm not used to this high fine dining or whatever yet, but what I do know is that we won't be pigging out, getting blasted drunk, and throwing out punches.'

'The humans of this realm are a terrible bore,' said Volantis.

'Some are, some aren't. That's the thing about humans. A whole lot of variety.'

"Welcome, Thanatos, to the estate of Bart Hammerhead." The airjet's A.I. spoke with a nondescript, helpful feminine tone. "I trust your flight has been comfortable?"

Throughout the flight, the A.I. had been focused only on auto-piloting so as to give Aldrich and Valera privacy to talk, but now that the flight was over, it was free to chime in.

"Comfortable," said Aldrich, standing up. "Can I get in touch with Bart?"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Hammerhead wishes to inform you that he is still preparing for your arrival. Moving his daughter is a delicate procedure that is taking his care and attention. In his stead, Arthur will be taking care of you."

"Arthur?" said Aldrich with a hint of interest.

"You know who this is?" questioned Valera.

"Arthur is not really so much a person. He's an automated butler. Also a luxury symbol. He's marketed as the perfect butler and often comes with these mansions as a groundskeeper and, if it comes down to it, guard," said Aldrich.

The airjet's holo-walls dimmed down, obscuring the view of the outside, but not for long as they opened up with a pressurized click. There, bowing his head beside the doorway was Arthur, the butler bot.

Arthur was approximately six foot two 188 (cm) with an almost completely human appearance, the only glaring difference being that his skin was a metallic grey with mechanical seams and lines running across his body, though in this day and age of cyberware, even that was not all that out there.

Dressed up in a dapper butler's suit with a broad-shouldered build and a rugged, handsome face with combed back silver hair and sparkling blue eyes, Arthur looked every bit like the quintessentially perfect butler. A perfect mix of both the classical and neo.

'Shit, seeing an Arthur-bot in the flesh. Though I guess not really since it's through your eyes, but still – it's crazy,' said V.

'In what way?' said Aldrich mentally.

'Ol' Arthur over here is way more dangerous than he looks. He's got insanely high encryption that even I can't break through unless I could find a key or workaround. You don't ever have that level of encryption unless you're hiding something important, and if that's the case, you better be damn sure you can fight for it too.

But that's Caliburn for ya. They started out as a tech business focused on creating neural networks and A.I. brains.

Once they created the perfect A.I. brain for service personnel, they went all in and bam, out of the tech industry birth canal came out Arthur, perfect butler extraordinaire.'

"I extend the most pleasant of greetings, Thanatos," said Arthur in a smooth, almost sing-song voice. "Allow my staff and I to guide you to your accommodations. Please, if there is anything you need carried or stored, do not hesitate to let me know."

Arthur's 'staff' hovered into view. They were drones colored in Arthur's own color scheme of blue, silver, and grey.

"It's alright," said Aldrich, stepping out of the airjet.

"And for you, miss?" Arthur extended a convivial hand towards Valera.

"I can carry myself well enough." Valera waved Arthur away, and he nodded, understanding.

"Excellent, then allow me to escort the two of you. Rest assured that Bart has laid out the most exquisite of meals for you. You will absolutely not regret taking the time to visit," said Arthur, strolling ahead of Aldrich. "If, at any time, you desire a drink or snack or anything within my means, do let me know, and I will assist you. If I cannot, one of my staff will."

Chapter 393: [Bonus chapter] The Dinner Incident 3

"Speaking of staff, you don't have any meat around here?" said Aldrich.

"Meat? Forgive me, but are you speaking of meat for sustenance or meat as in the colloquial term for bio-intellects?" said Arthur.

"Bio-intellects," said Aldrich. He made a mental note to himself to cut out the occasional slang he used as it would not fit with 'high society'. "I don't see any flesh and blood staff."

"Bart likes to keep his security detail tight and trustworthy," said Arthur. "I'm sure you can understand, given his daughter's condition. As a result, he places exclusive trust with me."

"I see." Made sense. The targeted shutdown on Bart's mansion that crippled his daughter for life had likely been allowed to occur due to an insider in the mansion, probably staff, being bribed or leaking information about the security.

But Arthur was a machine who could not be bribed. He could be infiltrated, but that was purely in the realm of theory. Not even V, a S class infiltrator, could break into Arthur's data without some form of pre-given access.

If one wanted absolute security, then it made sense to rely completely on an A.I. like Arthur.

"Under Bart's recommendation, I have also been advised to grant you temporary limited access to this mansion's security network," said Arthur. He opened his palm up and projected a blue barcode. "Scanning this will grant you said access. Just in case you had any doubts about the security of this area.

I assure you, the security here, both physical and net based, are absolutely impenetrable, giving you free reign to discuss what you want when you want without any fear. If, by a remote chance I cannot live up to my guarantees, you can reach out to Caliburn and they will compensate you with-,"

"I get it," said Aldrich. "Let me go ahead and scan that."

Aldrich stared at the barcode, and V, linked with his eyes, scanned it.

'Got it, boss. Let's see...'

After just a few seconds, V continued.

'Like Arthur said, this isn't complete access, just a rundown of the security measures in place. Basically, a way to show off like 'see how tough my cyber-fort is?'. And it makes sense. Caliburn would rather nuke itself than leak any of the encryption related to its neural network or Arthur's A.I. mind security.'

'So, how is the security?' asked Aldrich.

'Excellent. Top notch. Top shelf stuff. Y'know, standard for a company that caters only to the ultra wealthy with a perfect track for the past thirty years.

It's like I'm looking at a super-fortress. The encryption walls are thicker than the average customer at McGrill fastfoods.

Security at this level is flat out impenetrable unless you're really, really, really special or you get lucky and someone leaks a way inside.

There's also a detailed physical layout of the mansion too, but I won't bore you with the details unless you ask for them.'

'Anything that I should make note of?'

'Not really, to be honest. Dining room's on the first floor, and you'll take an elevator down. There's tons of security everywhere, turrets and bots and the like hidden in the walls, but that's to be expected.

Honestly, this just seems like your typical rich guy's mansion.

But notably more secure. Bart really did splurge on the protection here.

Most of the time, Arthur's just a butler. Having Arthur take full control requires paying a premium, so most peeps, even rich ones, only do it when they really have to, when they can't find anyone trustworthy at all or temporarily when they go on vacation or something.

But Bart is doing this 24/7, shelling out at least 50,000 credits a month.

I pray to the sake of all those credits that this security is good enough.'

"I'm done." Aldrich nodded, and Arthur turned off the projection.

"Excellent," said Arthur. "Then follow me."

Arthur bowed and then clapped his hands. Several meters away, the ceiling opened up to reveal a well-lit staircase going down. He gracefully stepped down the stairs, and Aldrich and Valera promptly followed close behind.

"Down these stairs leads to attic storage space," explained Arthur. "It's where my staff will come for spare parts or to carry in or out supplies that come by via airdrop. But storage is no place for esteemed guests like yourselves to be in, so we will take the elevator to the left here.

It will lead you directly to the dining floor, and there, you will find dinner prepared. My staff and I will accommodate any culinary cravings or service requests you like until Bart is prepared."

"I see." Aldrich stopped before he reached the end of the stairs. Valera stopped in synch with him. Ahead was the storage space that Arthur talked about. It was well lit and spacious, stretching continuously across the entire length of the building as one big room.

The room was austere, bare metal like the inside of a warehouse container. Blue and white lights lit the space up, showing one half of the room occupied by refrigerators holding frozen goods and even tanks holding live fish and animals for fresh food.

The other half was more industrial, packed with mechanical arms and containers filled with parts where drones came to be repaired and serviced.

Nothing was off about this space either.

But regardless of how safe this place was, Valera had her guard up, her training as a guardian knight making sure she never treated any moment, even moments of calm,

casually. At a moment's notice, she could materialize her armor over her dress and shield Aldrich from any threat.

Valera's caution instilled caution in Aldrich as well. Something felt ever so slightly off. From what V said, there was nothing off about the mansion's physical or net security. If there were intruders, there would most definitely have been signs of them.

At the very least, Arthur would have caught them considering he managed the entire extensive security system.

But the fact that Bart was not showing himself felt odd, now that Aldrich thought about it. Bart knew well ahead of time that Aldrich was coming. And Bart had an entire day to prepare his daughter for Aldrich's arrival.

Granted, maybe Bart could not just wheel his daughter's life support system around freely ahead of time, but still -

Better to be safe than sorry.

"Then I apologize, Arthur, but I'd like to stay here until Bart is ready. I wouldn't want to make him feel bad with us sitting around an empty table, you know?"

"Are you sure?" said Arthur, worried in a customer service type of way more so than any anxious way. "The accommodations here are quite lacking. There is no furniture nor readily prepared refreshments. All of that is located downstairs."

"I'm sure."

"Understood." Arthur bowed his head low, lower than he ever did before, hiding his facial expression. "I am deeply sorry to say, Thanatos, but I cannot grant your request."

Chapter 394: The Dinner Incident 4

The moment right after Arthur's last sentence seemed to stretch on to eternity. Aldrich's senses flared like flame fueled by gasoline, entering into his hyper focused 'zone' again. It was in this state of super sensitivity that he managed to take everything in.

Arthur's head opened up at the top of the skull now conveniently aimed at Aldrich with his low bow. It did not split apart with the fleshy rippling of blood and bone, but the clean disassembly of nanotechnology.

When the crown parted, it bared not a brain but a rotating sphere of charged blue metal, crackling with intense energy.

The entire process occurred nigh instantly, speaking volumes to how seamlessly Arthur could change from friendly butler to warbot.

But though it was a quick switch that could have given Aldrich a run for his money, it was not enough for Valera.

Before the buildup of energy in the brain sphere could unleash, Valera's fist, still pale, bared skin because she did not have the time to materialize her armor, smashed into Arthur's face. Valera's instincts, sharpened by the modern knowledge she assimilated from Aldrich, was wary enough to stop her from punching the exposed sphere-skull and causing a potential explosion.

Instead, Valera's fist crashed into Arthur's cheek. The grey synth-skin rippled in the slow motion of Aldrich's heightened senses, and in the waves of undulating nanite flesh, small waves of glowing orange radiated outwards from Valera's fist, traveling rapidly throughout Arthur's body.

Arthur's skin, no, likely his entire body, was composed of reactive nanostructures that could easily adapt to different types of damage and force to mitigate it as much as possible. The shockwave of Valera's punch did not meet resistance against stiff, breakable skin, but instead traveled near harmlessly through soft, jello-like flesh.

But remarkable as the reactive technology was, it had limits. Arthur's face remained unbroken, but the power of the punch still sent him flying across the storage room, smashing straight through a hovering drone, destroying it in a shower of sparks and falling metal parts.

The beam charging up in Arthur's head fired in a line of bright blue that crossed across the impressive length of the storage room instantly, boring a molten hole through the wall before Arthur himself plugged it up by slamming into it.

"Betrayal!?" said Valera, her fangs extending as her crimson eyes moved swiftly from side to side, alert to the maximum. Her black nails grew into deadly curves. Her armor materialized now, plating over her elegant black dress in fierce, spiked power.

"Possible, but doubtful," said Aldrich. He had read into Bart. Bart was a genuine man as far as it came to saving his daughter, and Aldrich would not have come here if he did not believe it. "More likely that Bart's been compromised."

'Shit!' said V. 'And before you ask, no, nothing's wrong! Mansion's operating normally. Arthur's nuts, but I couldn't breach his mind anyway. This is on Caliburn's encryption – you should definitely sue for compensation!'

'I see,' replied Aldrich. There was only so much V could do here. Without being able to directly jack into Arthur with her hair, she had no way of assessing Arthur's condition accurately.

'But I'd get the hell out of there. If Arthur's been hacked, then all of the info he showed me, the house layout, the security —'

'It could all be fake?'

'No, I'd have noticed something if it was big. But he could have changed something small.'

'Got it.' Aldrich prepared to leave. In unknown territory, even a small threat could snowball out of control. 'Volantis, can you sense anything?'

'Not presently,' said Volantis. His energy sensing vision did not track any notable energy signatures nearby. None that he could sense, anyway. It was entirely possible that something could be hiding itself.

"Chrysa, get me out of here," said Aldrich, sending a strong mental signal to Chrysa. She was sleeping in his boundary, but the urgency imparted by the signal woke her up in an instant.

'On it!' said Chrysa, tiny hints of grogginess still lazily clinging at her voice.

White crackles of energy surged around Aldrich and Valera but before they could fully form into a proper warp, they died down.

'W-what?' Chrysa spoke out, confused. 'There's something there, father, something...dark, something cold, something scary — it's stopping me!'

Aldrich felt an odd chill creeping in his feet. He looked down to see that the metal floor had been shrouded in a layer of shadowy dark. The darkness was shaped in countless shaking rings that distorted the space around them, all linking together in a haphazard chainmail of spatial flux.

The flickering darkness did not hurt Aldrich, nor did it have any physical pull against him, but he still felt immediate danger from it.

Aldrich did not waste any time. He stretched out his draconic wings through Volantis. Valera stayed close to his side, burnmaw shield raised, the flame spewing visage angry in its flaming ferocity. She could hitch a ride with Aldrich or just air jump her way out if needed.

It was not going to be hard to smash through the ceiling, even if it was fortified to withstand a missile strike. Especially with Valera assisting with a punch or two.

But before Aldrich jumped, he stopped, the energy vision from Volantis picking up a covering of concentrated power that spanned across the entirety of the ceiling. In fact, he did not need to use the energy vision at all.

The energy was clearly visible to just the naked eye, showing as a solid screen of grey. It was a shade of grey that Aldrich recognized. A type of energy he had seen before. Back in the Judicata. It was –

"This should have been done more efficiently. Arthur should have kept you distracted for longer. But now, I must intervene directly. I am sorry." An echoing female voice radiated from further down the storage room, and soon, the owner showed itself.

A woman, far taller than the average man, appeared dressed in a skintight bodysuit of black and grey. Her head was helmeted by a dome of glassy black like an astronaut's helmet. She seemed to 'stride' into existence, materializing from seemingly thin air with the completion of a full step. It was almost like reality was a theater curtain behind which she hid, and it was just now she decided to step out.

With her and the grey energy's appearance, Aldrich felt his technolink disable, the link between him and V cutting off.

"Kinesis. Attack dog of the United States," said Aldrich. "Has the government finally gotten tired of me?"

He wondered how Kinesis had hid herself so perfectly. If she used any tech related cloaking, V would have very likely picked it out. Volantis's Truesight could pick out most Alter based stealthing. But what they could not cover was alien technology.

Alien technology that the United States had the largest share of, if Mel and Beta's information was correct.

"The government and the Irregulars department work together," said Kinesis, her voice calm, unbroken. "But they are not one and the same."

"Does it matter at this stage?" said Aldrich. "The details are inconsequential. What you've started here is a direct attack against a sovereign Sentinel. A declaration of war."

"There will be no such conflict. That is why I am here." Kinesis raised her hand against Aldrich. It was open, likely ready to direct her construct ability against him.

This was no doubt an extremely dangerous situation.

Kinesis was a solid, all rounder S-ranker with powerful defensive and offensive abilities. Her construct ability included a powerful, permanently active defensive shield and incredibly versatile offensive powers in the form of her constructs.

In a flat out one versus one, Kinesis was superior to Aldrich. But right now, with Valera and Volantis, Aldrich could put up one hell of a fight. Beat her, too, if Kinesis's public data was all there was to go by, but Aldrich sorely doubted that.

"You seek to end his life, is it?" said Valera, venom thick in her voice. She stood in front of Aldrich with firm determination. "Then you will have to go through me. Unless I rip you apart first."

"If you've come here to assassinate me, then you've already failed," said Aldrich. "If you've come to fight me, then we'll fight. But you and I both know this won't be an easy fight. You can try to box us all in here with your construct ability, but we aren't small fry."

This box will break. The fight will get taken outside. It'll be noticed. And once it does, the government will have a storm of problems coming its way."

"There will be no fight," replied Kinesis. Her face, hidden as it was under her uniquely shaped helm, did not betray any emotion, nor did her voice. Though Aldrich could not read her voice right now, that unreadability was a hint of its own.

Kinesis's voice was always calm, but it felt calm in a controlled, human way. Right now, her voice was calm in a distinctly inhuman manner. Devoid of emotion and tone not due to training and willful control, but a lack of humanity to begin with.

"I do not like conflict. It depletes me. And I have used up much in ignoble service already."

Chapter 395: The Dinner Incident 5

In Kinesis's outstretched hand, an orb appeared, made of the same distorting darkness as the stuff that covered the ground.

Instead of being a single ring, this structure was infinitely more complex, comprised of countless rings within rings interlocking together, moving to create what looked like the illusion of spheres moving within the sphere.

It was a structure that reminded Aldrich of a hypersphere, the four dimensional representation of a sphere.

The rings of darkness in the ground stretched upwards, growing thin. They started to flicker with more intensity, rippling the space around them even more to the point where the ground was just a mess of stretched out colors and blurred details.

'Volantis, analysis,' said Aldrich, trying to focus on the sphere. However, in his red tinted U.I., the sphere looked like a blur, like a glitched out mess that did not belong.

'Error: unreadable,' said Volantis, defaulting to a programmed response as he lacked the capacity to describe it. 'It is impossible to discern that...thing. It does not belong to this world, nor the world of Elduin, nor this entire reality, I fear.'

'Then I'll have to treat it as an attack'. Aldrich reacted quickly, as did Valera.

In synchronized union, Valera threw her shield. Her shield throw skill now had an upgraded variant called [Ballista Shield] that dramatically increased the speed and damage of any thrown shield on top of giving it an armor sundering effect.

With that, any shield she threw was going to be comparable to an explosive missile.

Aldrich assisted her, pointing at Kinesis with an accusing finger. He cast a newly learned spell: [Anti-Life Beam]. A coiled beam comprised of two intertwining strands of black and purple shot out with a deep wail.

The beam had extremely high firepower, dealing massive disintegrating damage over time and constantly applying a chance to roll for an instant kill with the chances of that roll increasing the longer a unit was affected with disintegration and the lower their health.

It also had the neat ability to disrupt channeling abilities, so it was a two for one in this situation to not just hurt Kinesis, but stop whatever mystery box, or rather sphere in this case, she was planning on unleashing.

A wall construct appeared in front of Kinesis, completely blocking her out. Valera's shield crashed into it, gouging out a crater, but did not go all the way through. Aldrich's beam rapidly started to drill through the wall, but not fast enough.

The fact that Kinesis created a wall was concerning. It meant that whatever she was doing did not require line of sight or a clear path to Aldrich.

'Channeled attack,' said Aldrich. 'Let's deal with it our usual way. Splitting up. Valera, you attack in melee range. I'll provide support and try to angle around for blindspot strikes.'

'Understood.'

Valera, using [Bloodburst] on her feet, rapidly accelerated to Kinesis by basically propelling herself with an explosion. She could do that in game as well, and it let her move faster at the cost of precision, sort of like a sloppy dash.

At the end of it, there was a brief delay where she had to orient herself before she did anything.

She shoulder bashed into the wall, smashing it apart and revealing Kinesis. The shield dislodged from the shattered wall, and Valera grabbed it and slammed it down on Kinesis's astronaut helm in one fluid motion.

Aldrich saw that Valera was making improvements in the real world. She could accurately aim her [Bloodburst] and even chain it fluidly into attacks. He realized further that these movements were familiar.

They were Stella's movements, copied almost perfectly from Stella knowing how to maneuver around using her explosions. Valera was learning from her sparring with Stella.

Kinesis did not have enough time to react with another construct, especially not at this range. The shield smashed into Kinesis's helm and sent her catapulting to the ground where she bounced off the construct fortified ground and poned off the fortified ceiling.

This repeated several times with Kinesis smashing through drones, mechanical repair stations, and fridges until she stopped, regaining her balance several dozens of meters away. A crack was on her helm, though not deep enough to show the mysterious face - a face nobody had ever seen - underneath.

However -

The hypersphere was still floating in the air, where Kinesis was. It seemed to be growing, the movement of the spheres within becoming faster and faster. In reaction, the rings of darkness littering the floor started to sway back and forth in strange dance to the sphere's call.

Background noises - the hum of drone repair stations and fridges, the buzz of still active drones - all of that faded into an eerie silence.

Valera stepped back and aimed her shield at the sphere, taking a proactive stance to deal with it. "Burn!"

The burnmaw opened up and unleashed a torrent of black outlined hellfire, but when the flames subsided, it showed that the sphere was still there, utterly unharmed.

Aldrich looked around again at the walls and ceilings to see if Valera's blow had broken Kinesis's concentration.

Not the case.

The walls were still thickly padded with defensive constructs. But doing this, creating a cage the size of an entire mansion floor and making sure it was fortified enough to withstand escape attempts from not just Aldrich, but Valera - someone who had at the minimum power comparable to an A+ rank Augmenter, should have been insanely taxing.

And, Aldrich realized, it was. There was a reason why Kinesis did not attack using any constructs. She could not, or, even if she could, could not do so with any real efficacy. It

was like she was a current of electricity, 90% of her charge diverted to the cage, 10% to anything else.

It seemed that Kinesis was fully willing to severely nerf herself, using up all her power to reinforce the cage, to keep Aldrich contained.

"I apologize," said Kinesis, standing up again. "But you must rest now."

'She can't defend herself,' said Aldrich. 'Break the channel by dealing with her.'

Valera was upon Kinesis again, this time with her limbs covered in a glowing purple hexagonal mesh from Aldrich supporting her with [Death Surge], dramatically enhancing her already impressive strength.

She palmed Kinesis's helm and smashed her into the shadow filled ground with an explosive impact. Kinesis reacted by covering herself in a layer of construct armor, but nerfed as she was, it was all she could do to protect herself.

"Undo this attack!" roared Valera as she raised Kinesis up and then smashed her head back into the ground again.

Kinesis was silent.

"Fine. Then I will kill you." Valera slammed Kinesis down again, and this time a shattering sound filled the air.

Valera raised Kinesis up in the air by the top of her helm. The helmet around the face area, which should have exposed the S-class hero's face. An enigmatic face that nobody had ever gotten to witness before.

Kinesis, the mystery S-ranker who obtained a meteoric rise to the highest hero rank in just a single year. One of the very few heroes in this day and age that kept their hero life and private life completely separate.

Rejected any corporate sponsors. Had no need for fans. Only operated in secrecy. Had no recorded residence, no base of operations, no team members. No origin or history.

What kind of face would belong to that many enigmas?

"Wha-?" began Valera, confused.

Aldrich shared Valera's reaction.

There was no face behind Kinesis's helmet. There was just a mass of cloudy golden-brown speckled with a fog of cosmic blue and purple speckled with little glints like stars. It looked like, Aldrich, realized, a nebula.

The cosmic fog leaked out of the shattered helmet, distorting space wherever it touched. That included Valera's arm.

"Argh!" Valera dropped Kinesis reflexively. She looked at her arm. It was twisted and mangled, distorted spatially. Not just that, but it looked greyed out, sapped of color. The grey seemed to start spreading up her arm, and in reaction, Valera without hesitation gripped the affected arm by the shoulder and ripped it off.

She regrew a new one, blood sputtering from her bared shoulder joint reforming into a full limb.

"Ahh." Kinesis put a hand over broken helm. "I am losing more of myself again. But it is over."

"Silence. You will die now." Valera, more careful to keep distance this time, raised her shield in the air, ready to smash Kinesis's head again.

Aldrich looked back at the sphere. It had disappeared. But in the next instant, darkness expanded out from it. The darkness on the floor expanded in reaction too, as if to eagerly reach out and meet its kindred shadows.

The darkness engulfed everyone and everything in the room.

Chapter 396: Breaking In

"Alright, if we're doing this, are we still doing it head on?" said Stella. "Blasting through the dome and drilling down the labs in one massive frontal."

"Yeah, that ain't changin'," said Clint. "But what does have to change is we gotta split up sooner than we thought. Fifth sword is dangerous as all hell still and trained to a razor's edge. And we got sensitive quarry here that I ain't takin' a risk gettin' hurt." He nodded over to Falco and Alan.

"I can hel-," began Falco.

"Nah. You respect me, doncha, kid? Then you gotta listen to me. You don't gotta take all the fights that are thrown your way," said Clint. He was stern, but not overly so as to be reprimanding. "Fifth sword's got some serious firepower - he can supercharge alcohol with energy, ignite it, and then breathe it out as vapor-flames that can easily torch dozens of fellas, melting em' down to the bone, and if that wasn't enough, poisonin' them.

That's his main offense, actually, last time we fought, and it just makes it a shitshow to take him with numbers. It's how I got DB's brother killed."

"It wasn't your fault," said Diamondback. "Samuel knew the risks."

"Yeah, but he still trusted in me, the Unbreakable, to protect him. And I failed him." Clint shook his head. "This time, ain't nobody be dyin' on my watch. Not a single damn one of you. I'm takin the fifth on my own. No questions asked."

"Totally fine by me," said Tox. "I haaaate the sound of getting torched."

"I don't care about the fifth," said Ace. "I just need to get to the scientists. The head, if he's still there."

"Lab staff's still the same," said Alexis. "Highly specialized and trained team of former top researchers that aren't easily replaceable. Though, Ace, I get your grudge from being a labrat, but we have to make sure it fits into broader plans here."

"It does," said Clint. "DB, tell em' about the plan B we had."

Diamondback nodded. "Since Thanatos wanted us to make as much noise as possible, I re-adjusted the original plan I had for this raid. For a frontal attack, having as many people as possible to break through to the bottom vault as quickly as possible was the best solution.

Originally, though it was more of a traditional heist. Less gusto and guns and more sneaking.

This is why I hired Kris. He's an exceptional techno to have on any heist because of his ability."

"Black Cloud's the name of my power," said Kris. "As you might be able to guess, I can create a black cloud around me. Said cloud is impossible to penetrate with any optical or sensory system."

"Are we using that to sneak in?" Stella raised a brow. "Because even if we aren't gonna be seen directly, a moving black cloud's still suspicious as all hell."

"True," said Kris. "But that's not the purpose of my power. It prevents technology from registering anything within the cloud at all. If we pass by cameras or even trip sensors, they'll register nothing.

This applies to bots and drones as well.

As long as nobody sees us with their own two fleshy eyes, we're for all intents and purposes completely invisible."

"Gotcha," said Stella. "But shit, if we're gonna be busting that dome down, they're gonna know about us no matter what."

"That's IF we're going for a frontal," said Diamondback. "There is a secondary way into the labs. It just takes more time."

"There's a terminal in the domewall that I can jack into. Once I take it over, I should be able to access basic system infrastructure like the doors and elevator system," said Kris. "The issue is, this takes time. At the very least, ten minutes."

"That's a hell of a lot of time during a heist," said Tox. "Cloud might cover us, but it isn't going to cover your attempt to hack into the system. They'll register it."

"The good thing is, the cloud hides my infiltration," said Kris. "The bad thing? If I'm using my cloud to cover myself in cyberspace, it doesn't work in realspace."

"This sneaky Plan B wouldn't have worked then," noted Stella. "Ain't no way in hell that you don't get picked up by a camera or drone or sensor or anything in the ten whole minutes you're standing out there in the open, cracking into their system."

"It's why it's a plan B," said Diamondback. "But if we merge plan A and B together, it works."

"I'll go in and make a big ruckus," said Clint. "Show myself to em'. They'll know me and panic. Overreact and send as many people out. Even the fifth sword, most likely."

Hell, I'll call the guy out. Like most the swords, he's got a real taste for fighting and a sense of honor to boot. More likely than not, he'll take my bait."

He gave a knowing look to Falco as the kid already had wide eyes in anticipation of joining Clint on the action. "But it's me and ONLY me. Any more of you, and the labs will get suspicious that this ain't just me out to get revenge. They'll know more parties are involved. Get more wind that it's a distraction."

"Which leaves us to sneak in," said Stella. She sighed, disappointed. "But it means I won't be able to use my new and improved Bunker Buster. I really wanted to have a good time and blow some shit up..."

"Sis, you scare me with your idea of what a good time is," said Tox. "But I can roll with this plan. Better, really. Less risk."

"Yeah. Elevators will take us to the researchers, too. It's all I want out of this," said Ace.

"Just make sure to stay on track with the team," said Alexis.

"No issues with me," said Alan. "The fewer cyberware repairs I have to do, the better."

"Guess I can do this..." said Falco.

Nobody proposed a dissenting opinion.

"Good." Clint put his fist towards Stella, smiling at her. "Alright. Gimme a charge. I'll store it, remember it. And, hopefully, put out an explosion that'll meet your expectations. Be like as if you were there yourself!"

"Hah! I have high expectations, y'know?" Stella grinned and bumped her fist with Clint's. Her small fist looked comically tiny compared to Clint's enormous brick of a hand, but she still punched at him with confident energy.

When their knuckles touched, crackling sparks flew between their fists.

Clint closed his eyes, nodding. He whistled softly. "This is some explosive stuff. Shame I can't remember the stuff my body picks up permanently. Would've loved to keep somethin' like this.

Either way, though, it's time to raise some hell."

Meteor Labs, 20th floor - ??? Research Room

The twentieth floor of Meteor Labs, nestled just above the vault system, was dimly lit. Smooth, polished, sterile metal tiling filled out the floor, ceilings, and walls, and cleaning drones whirred about, keeping the surfaces as decontaminated as possible.

Scientists covered from head to toe in white and grey hazmat suits moved about silently, their voices muted under their helmets. This was by design. The lab was designed to have as little stimulus as possible, whether that be through light or sound.

Otherwise it might react.

The room had a circular orientation that revolved around its center where, in a depressed chamber, the object of study stood.

Nestled in a chamber of fortified glass was a black ring with a diameter of approximately three meters. The ring itself was fairly thin, made of flickering darkness that swayed errantly. Every little movement of the darkness distorted space around it, warping it like paper on the verge of tearing apart.

At the center of the ring was a rotating blue sphere, though it barely passed as one. It was more accurate to call it an amorphous blob, like a ball of azure goo that rippled and fluxed seemingly at random.

Scientists peered down at the ring from their workstations above, though never for too long. They mostly watched diagrams and graphical presentations of it from screens that constantly analyzed the object.

On eye-pads, they wrote down notes furiously.

A near silent buzz indicated that an elevator had reached the level. The scientists dropped what they were doing in surprise. Coming down to the twentieth floor required high levels of authorization.

It did not happen on a whim.

The elevator doors opened up, and out come a giant of a man that most definitely was not a scientist. He was dressed in baggy, purple pants decorated with floral cherry blossom patterning with wooden sandals for shoes. His sculpted upper body was completely bare, confidently showcasing bodybuilder level musculature.

He had a huge metal gourd, easily as big as a large man, strapped to his back.

The man's rugged face was thoroughly scarred, with one particularly notable scar running over his left eye, rendering it pale and blind. His messy black hair fell down to his shoulders in an unkempt wave that made him look positively homeless. Despite all this, he maintained a wide, happy grin.

"Dammit, all of you look the same in this getup!" said the man, known as Shuten-Doji, the Fifth Sword. "Where's Emi! Papa's back for a surprise visit!"

Chapter 397: [Bonus chapter] {Shuten Doji}

The scientists in the room all immediately stopped what they were doing, eye-pads frozen in their padded hands. Though all of their faces were covered under their hazmat helmets, it was pretty easy to tell by their fear stiffened body language that Shuten Deoji was not exactly an expected presence.

Nor a welcome one.

"Do you all really have to dress up in this gear?" Shuten Doji narrowed his eyes as he looked around. "You all look the same! And it covers up my little Emi's pretty face!"

Shuten Doji's voice was naturally loud, but in the soundscape of the almost completely silent lab, it was positively disturbing. And the contained ring thought so too, chaotically fluxing like it was grating under the noise.

Several lab personnel stared down at their eye-pads. On it, beside the diagram of the ring and orb structure, was a bar labeled STABILITY. It was a healthy green bar, though with Shuten Doji's recent bout of shouting, it dipped down into a distinctly less healthy, more threatening orange.

Seeing this, the scientists panicked and talked into their helmets while rapidly motioning towards Shuten-Doji.

In response, one of the scientists hurriedly rushed up to Shuten Doji and grabbed his hand. Even with the bulky hazmat suit on, the scientist was like a child compared to Shuten's physical stature despite being a fully grown human.

And, in a literal sense, that was true: she was Emi, his daughter.

Despite the size difference, Emi dragged Shuten Doji away back towards the elevator like she was the embarrassed parent and he the unruly child. She rapidly inputted an access code on the elevator's control panel, and its solid metal doors slid open with a quiet hum. She positively pushed Shuten Doji into the elevator, and he stumbled in with uncoordinated, drunken languor.

When the elevator doors closed, Emi took her helmet off with a pressurized click. She was young, no older than twenty-five, with black hair streaked with white and striking violet eyes. Her hair was tied back in a professional ponytail so as to not deal with the hassle of having to adjust hair through a hazmat suit.

"Dad, what did I tell you about showing up like this!?" said Emi, sighing deeply. She scrolled through a square shaped display in the elevator and tapped the 2nd floor labeled 'Recreation'. "And more pressingly, why are you even here!?"

"What? I can't visit my daughter anymore?" Shuten Doji laughed. "Look at you, you're blushing! You're embarrassed of your old pa, is that it?"

"Of course, I am! We were doing research! And didn't I tell you the N-ring is sensitive? But you barged in there again shouting like it was one of your drunken nights out! I should petition to have your access revoked!" Emi's nose crinkled. "And you've been drinking too!"

"I'm always drinking," said Shuten Doji with a grin. When he looked down at his daughter's disapproving look, he frowned. "Oh, c'mon, cut your pa some slack. Ever since the accident, I have to drink or else the virus in my body starts going wild."

Shuten Doji tapped his liver, grimacing in remembrance.

"Doesn't mean you should be drinking too much," said Emi, though by her faint smile, it was obvious that she relented. "I know it's healing you, but you still get all the symptoms of being drunk. Thank goodness you're a happy drunk, but still – be more considerate the next time you come around, okay?"

"I know, I know." Shuten Doji patted Emi's head gently. He grinned from ear to ear. "It just makes me so proud, knowing a kid of mine is this smart. I was dumb as bricks growing up. And drinking all the time's made me even dumber than a brick now."

When you were born, I was afraid you'd be a meathead like me, but thank goodness you can live a quiet life."

"Not so quiet," said Emi. She started to get more excitement, her eyes glowing a shade brighter. "The research we've done on the N-ring is incredible. Energy from a different dimension. The Mind Over Matter Theory. The Metamorphosis Phenomenon. It's all starting to come together.

If we crack the N-ring, I just know we'll be able to change the world for the better. We could engineer life at an unprecedented level. Beyond even what Ori, the so-called Sentinel of Life, can do, and we won't be selfish like him, using power only to rule over a tiny little piece of land.

We could save humanity! And-,"

Emi looked to Shuten Doji's liver. "We could cure you."

"Hah! You'd use a world changing cure on this busted old liver? I'll pass." Shuten Doji felt nothing but happiness staring down at his daughter's bright eyes. Eyes bright with dreams.

A long, long time ago, he himself had those kinds of eyes. When he wanted to be a hero and use his brawn for good. Before reality hit. In the back of his mind, he knew that reality would also hit Emi as well, if she and her team did manage to crack the N-ring.

That power, if it was actually unlocked, tapped into – it would change the power balance of the world. The Trident would use it to further themselves. No, with something like that, they could start the Revolution and overthrow the current world order.

Emi would never get to see her research be used just for the idealistic sake of 'saving the world'. The Trident would make sure of that.

There was a part of Shuten Doji's mind that always thought about what he would say to her to convince her, but he always gave up before thinking about it too much. Fighting with his daughter – the only thing good left in this world for him – filled him with too much pain to bear.

Deep down, there was another part of him that wanted Emi's research to never bear fruit. For the N-ring to always be an alien mystery. At least that way, she would still be happy studying the unknown and he could keep being her father with no conflict.

It was why Blackwater was so damn important. It was only a matter of time before a suitable host for the Machine Heart would be found. At that point, the N-ring was not needed for the Trident, or, more accurately at this point, the Japanese and Italian Prongs to start the Revolution.

They could beat back the Russian Prong, mechanized as they were, susceptible to the Machine Heart, and take over the Panopticon. It would change everything. Then, if Emi cracked the N-ring, she could see her research used for good and not as a weapon of war.

Just needed to hold against the Russian Prong.

How the hell did the Valentinos not know something was up with them?

That the entirety of the Russian Prong had turned into machines?

The Italians had Mad Jack with them, one of the legends of Cyberspace. What the hell was that freak doing? Just sitting on his ass and playing videogames?

Honestly, knowing him, that was a very distinct possibility.

Shuten Doji growled. He hated people like Mad Jack. People who lacked discipline. Well, it was not like Shuten Doji himself could judge too much. Among the Seven Swords, he had the least discipline in terms of lifestyle, but at least he had his powers as an excuse.

He had to consume alcohol to fight and, now, after the injury from the Unbreakable, survive.

But Mad Jack dicked around for no other reason than his own whim. Even now, in this absolutely critical juncture, Mad Jack was completely unreachable.

Had he gotten a whiff of the Italian Prong's half-baked plan to try and capture Mad Jack and force him to be the vessel for the Machine Heart?

Whatever the case, fuck that kid.

"Dad, is something wrong?" Emi tapped Shuten Doji's arm.

"Wha? Oh, nothing, Emi." Shuten Doji smiled again. "Just thinking of business. Always makes me so damn stressed. Figure by now my head would've exploded if I didn't drink all the time."

"How about retiring?" said Emi. "You're pushing sixty. I know that's not too old for an Alter like you, but you'll only be getting weaker from here. And I want to have a father I can show my kids to, when I do decide to have them."

"Kids!? Where!?" said Shuten Doji, eyes widening. Then narrowing in threat. "And who!? He better be one hell of a guy. For his own safety."

"Aaaand this is why I've never dated seriously." Emi closed her eyes, sighing.

At that moment, the elevator abruptly stopped, and the lights turned from white to red.

A mechanical voice blared through the confines of the elevator.

"RED ALERT: AN ATTACK ON THE LAB HAS BEEN REGISTERED. THE ATTACK IS CLASSIFIED AS A HIGHLY SERIOUS THREAT. ALL PERSONNEL ARE RECOMMENDED TO EVACUATE TO THE LAST FIVE FLOORS. REPEAT: ALL PERSONNEL ARE RECOMMENDED TO EVACUATE TO THE LAST FIVE FLOORS.

FAILURE TO RESPOND TO THIS EVACUATION PROMPTLY MAY LEAD TO BEING LOCKED OUT OF SECURE FLOORS."

"What the fuck?" Shuten Doji hunched over Emi, protecting her. "An attack? Here of all places? And now?"

"I'll link to the security feed!" said Emi. She pressed on her wrist and a blue jack-in chord popped out from an indent in her synthetic skin. With shaky hand, she plugged the jacker into a slot beneath the elevator's control panel.

In the next moment, the panel went from showing floor options to the outsides of the lab.

Shuten Doji's breath caught in his throat. The screen showed a camera feed from outside, capturing a man peering down through a smoking, gaping hole in the dome. A man that Shuten Doji knew all too well.

"W-what is it, dad?" said Emi.

"A threat." Shuten Doji immediately grew serious, his smile wiping off his face. He clenched his fists, and tubes from the massive gourd strapped on his back emerged, sinking needle ends into his flesh.

Alcohol poured directly into his body, and flickers of purple energy glowed visibly through his veins. "Emi, open the elevator doors. Once I leave, you go down, and you stay down, alright?"

Where it's safe.

Dad will deal with this."

"Got it!" said Emi.

The elevator doors opened to show a red tinted room. Shuten Doji stepped out.

"And you better make sure to come back!" said Emi. "What's the point of making the trip all the way here if we can't even have dinner together!?"

Shuten Doji looked back with a grin. "I will. Promise."

Chapter 398: Happiness

In the living room of a homely Brooklyn apartment, Neo-York -

A boy woke up with a start, his face, healthily tanned from spending a few too many hours playing under the sun, deathly pale. Sweat pooled down from his matted black hair. He breathed heavily, chest heaving in and out before he leaned backwards, resting against a rough synth-leather couch pockmarked with holes in need of repair.

He sucked in a deep breath before leaning forward, palming his face. The light of early morning struggled to stream in through the prison of blinders covering the windows.

Last night, he had stayed up waiting for his parents to come back, but they never did. It was not unusual. They were heroes, after all. 'Justice never sleeps!' was what his dad would have said to him.

"Oh..."

The boy looked down and saw a green blanket wrapped around him. He smiled. That meant his parents had come back and tucked him in.

It meant the nightmares, those awful, terrible nightmares - they were all just that: dreams.

"How's our little champ doing?" A sleepy voice greeted the boy. A man stepped into the room with a yawn.

"Dad!" The boy rushed off the couch and hugged his father with all his strength. Where his father had a tired tear welling up from the corner of his eye, tears of relief trickled down the boy's face.

"Hey now, what's wrong?" The father looked down at his son with surprise he masked with a smile. He was an average man by all definitions of the word. Plain face, plain features. He had an above average physique, but somehow his aura of normality just completely overshadowed it.

It was his smile, though, that was extraordinary. It was not a picture perfect smile, not the type you would see on holo-boards with biosculpted models who had every little part of their bodies fixed. He had a missing tooth or two, some crooked, some yellowed, some chipped. His lip was a little uneven because of an improperly healed scar.

But the prettiness of a smile was always secondary to the emotion behind it.

And his smile was cheery, hopeful, light - the type that made anyone put down their guards. It was honest. A mirror into a soul that was warm and pure.

"I-I had a dream that you and mom got captured, someone did horrible things to you and, and-," The boy sniffled. "You never came back."

"Hah, what a load of shit. I'm right here, aren't I?" The father picked up his son into the air, aiming his beaming smile right up at his child. It was an effective weapon, wiping away his son's fear and replacing it with a smile of his own.

Splash.

The father groaned, closing his eyes as his red-tinted hair now dripped water.

"Honey, how many times do I have to tell you to watch your language around our son?" A woman in baggy shirt and pants stepped into view. She was much more conventionally attractive than her husband with crystal blue eyes and aqua tinted short hair.

Her hand was upraised, shimmering with blue energy that made it obvious where the water came from.

"Damn it, I keep forgetting. I mean-," The father sighed. "I'll just keep quiet and fix us up some breakfast. Can you take care of him until then?"

"Of course." The mother took the son from his father's hold and held the boy with equal ease. No surprise there. They were both trained heroes after all.

Granted, they were just D-listers, but the son knew better than anyone that they were the best heroes. If not to the world, then to him, at the very least.

The father's head started to steam as heat circulated across his body, drying out his head. His hair poofed back up to its usual spiky structure. He got behind a kitchen counter and started to put on an apron with practiced ease.

A very deserved practiced ease. The son's father was an infinitely better cook than his mother.

"What's wrong, dear?" The mother looked to her son, worried. But as any parent would, she hid her worry behind a comforting smile. Her smile was more reserved, slighter than her husband's.

But it was still comforting in a cool, calming sort of way.

"Nothing," said the son. After facing both his parents' smiles, the memories of the nightmare had faded away, locked away in that chamber of oblivion where old dreams went to and never came back from. "I'm just happy you two are back."

=**=

"I've Bloomed!" The boy sprinted into the living room. He was bigger now that he was twelve, full of the energy that only the early teens could have.

"What, really!?" The father whipped his neck toward the boy. He was holding a volume of manga in his hands. Fire crackled from his fingertips involuntarily, triggered by the sudden excitement. The book burnt to a crisp. "Shit! This fireproof coating's a scam!"

"No, you've just gotten stronger." The mother waved her hand, sending a bubble towards the burning book that quenched the fire, though the book was still left irreparably charred.

"Anyways-," The father tossed the volume away, expertly landing it in an open trashcan. "This is incredible! I always knew you had it in you, my boy! Tell me, what are your powers? Fire and water? Steam? You aren't a Mutant or anything, so it must be Blaster related, considering your mother and I are both Blasters."

"That's not how Alter genetics works," said the mother. "Parental powers are only a rough indicator of what the child inherits."

"Heh, no matter what the studies say, I know our son's got something amazing," said the father.

"Look!" The boy clapped his hands together, and when he pulled them apart, a green colored shield floated in the space between his hands.

"Oh, you're a Creator!" said the father.

"I know it's not either of your powers, but-," began the son.

"Nonsense! Some parents care that their kid has their powers, but not us. Anything you have is the best to us." The father knelt down by his son, inspecting the floating shield.

"This shield's invincible!" said the boy. "Just today, I saved one of my friends from a holo-board that collapsed."

"Hoho, invincible, you say? It's not good to be too confident, you know. Your old man will show you that some crappy old below regulations holo-board is nothing." The father wound back his fist and punched the shield. The force pinged back and knocked him flat on his back, dazed.

"You should take that advice yourself," said the mother with a sigh.

"See?" said the son. He was positively brimming with excitement, beaming with a happiness found from denying a powerless fate - a fate he once thought he was resigned to. "With this, I can finally, finally be a hero. Just like you two! I can take down a big villain group like the Trident too!"

"You're a late Bloomer," said the mother, putting a hand on her chin in contemplative thought. "Right on the cusp of puberty. They say the earlier or later a power Blooms, the stronger it is. But every power, no matter how strong, has to be trained."

The father groaned as he got back up, blowing at his aching knuckles. He grinned at his son. "And, son, you won't see better trainers than the two of us. You know, your dad's just gotten promoted to the B rank, heh.

But-,"

The father knelt in front of his son, putting a firm hand on his child's shoulder. He looked into his son's eyes with orange, firm eyes. "Are you sure you want to train to fight?

To be a hero?

It's not all what the AA programs show you.

It's hard.

You'll make many friends.

But you'll lose some.

You'll save so many people.

But you'll fail others.

But even through all that, to be a real hero, to have a golden age heart, you need to know that you can never, ever give up. You can't ever let the weight of losses drag you down. Or, worse, make you bitter. Spiteful."

"Enough, honey, he's just turned twelve and barely now Bloomed. Heavy talks like that are for later," said the mother.

The father shook his head. "No. A hero's job is hard and can have, no, will have so many sacrifices. Aldrich needs to understand that before he steps foot on it."

"I know," said the son. He met his father's stare with equal, unbroken intensity. "I still want to do this. It was always my dream to be like you two. I can't let it slip when it's right in front of me."

"Like us two, huh?" The father laughed and patted his son's head. "It's fine to be like us, to reach for us, son, to follow us. But in time, you need to learn how to follow this." He tapped his chest, right above his heart. "To fight for yourself."

Chapter 399: {The Search}

It all happened so fast.

In one moment, Valera was right in front of Aldrich, her shield readied, her newly regenerated fist eagerly clenched to bash in the foe known as Kinesis's head once more. Her previous blows had struck true to great effectiveness, after all, cracking open a hole in that annoying jar head.

But then everything changed. The entire room, full of golemic contraptions that she now knew as 'drones' and 'fridges' – yes, she had been studying avidly whenever she could about the real world on the marvelous invention known as the Net – just collapsed in on itself.

It was like the fabric of space was held up by just a few safety pins, and those pins had been loosened in one fell instant. Reality broke. The firmness of the ground, the greys of the metal tiles, the dry coolness of the air – all of it just swirled together into a mass of everything that became nothing.

As that happened, Valera felt all the magical power coursing through her instantly disappear, rendering her near powerless.

It was a common misconception that only mages used mana, but that was simply not the case. Every being of Elduin had mana within them – that was the fundamental fuel through which any power, both mystical and martial arts based, manifested.

Similar to the 'Ether' of this new realm that could be used for countless different effects ranging from fueling golems to granting humans wondrous powers.

It felt like she had stepped into a Void, a lifeless area where absolutely no mana could exist. There, it was impossible to use any martial arts, spells, or even the vast majority of racial abilities. One could only rely on their natural physical strength or, very rarely, some innate passive powers.

When reality collapsed, it tore aside like a trapdoor to reveal a yawning pit of darkness. That darkness pulled her in with inexorable, irresistible force, and there, she lost all

track of Aldrich. She knew she was falling, but she did not realize how fast until little specks of grey came into her vision, far into the horizon, and then passed over in an instant before she could even tell what they were.

However, Valera was a warrior. A trained one, too. She remembered her captain from the Midnight Order. How he could catch arrows from even the most expertly trained of elves in his hands. Or even iron-balls from dwarven cannons.

When she asked him how he could see the projectiles coming at him, projectiles too fast for even trained eyes to catch, he had responded coolly: a warrior that deals with only that which he can see is no true warrior at all.

It had taken decades of training, but Valera had come to understand what he meant. Martial arts was, at its basic level, a game of predictions. Move before the enemy moves to secure victory. If you act on a prediction and not a reaction, then no enemy is ever too fast for you.

Valera saw a tiny speck of grey in the distance of the darkness again. She held out her arm at the precisely right moment. She felt herself stop abruptly as she held onto what looked like a floating cloud of nebulous grey. She had braced her body for impact, but there was none, as if her momentum had just magically been removed in an instant.

She cocked her head. The fact that she could hold onto this grey cloud in the first place was odd enough. She did not feel like there was any tangible mass to hold onto. But she did not risk anything. She kept a tight grip within the cloud.

As she did so, something odd happened.

The grey color from the cloud began to leech into her body which she now realized was completely black, just like the rest of the endless void around her. The grey gave color back to her body, and at first, she panicked as it crept through her arm.

It was the same grey that had gotten on her when she bashed Kinesis's head open. But unlike before, the grey did not break her apart. Instead, it gave her power. It was not mana. Nor was it ether. If it was either, she could use her abilities again.

(Author's Note: I don't know if this has been mentioned, but game world beings can use ether like mana. But converting mana into ether is so far impossible, preventing alters from using mana)

Valera could not use this odd power, but it gave her what she could best describe as weight. Before, when she was shrouded in darkness, she felt like part of the infinite void around her, just more darkness inevitably destined to be pulled down into whatever lay below.

But with the grey coloring her body, she felt more stable, more anchored. She tentatively let go of the cloud, and she realized she did not fall anymore. But when she got away from the cloud, the grey started to leech back out from her body.

Once all the grey faded, she would start to fall again.

She could move around freely in this dark space, and she gingerly reached out and touched the grey cloud again. It 'recharged' the color in her body, stopping her from falling into oblivion once more.

"What is this? Where am I?" Valera wondered out loud. Her lips moved, but no sound escaped from them. It seemed that in this realm, there was no such thing as sound.

Regardless, those were questions to shelve for later.

What she needed to do now was find Aldrich.

But...but where?

Valera stood atop the cloud, looking all around her. There were just vast stretches of darkness. In the distance, again, there were a few grey specks, probably clouds just like this one she could hop onto to recharge her existence.

She tried to focus, to link herself to Aldrich mentally, but it was impossible. Not only did she not have the mana to do that, the connection was completely severed to begin with.

Did that mean Aldrich was dead?

No. Valera shook her head. This realm did not seem innately harmful. Most likely, Aldrich had been sent hurtling down the darkness like her.

But...

She bit her lip, anxious.

Aldrich did not have nearly the same physical stats as her. His reaction speed was not there. And though he was a trained fighter in this new life, more trained than he had been in Elduin, he was not at her level where he could master [Inception], the martial principle that let her get a hold of herself even whilst moving impossibly fast.

And what she had seen in that brief moment before the room collapsed worried her. It was Volantis. His red dot eye had turned off, probably from the mana disappearing.

Whenever a Living Armor was disabled, they became complete dead weight to whoever wore them. The wearer suffered blindness, immobilization, a debuff to their stats, and many more debilitations.

For so long, Volantis had been a tremendous asset to Aldrich. And now, he ended up being a prison.

Had Volantis not been there, Valera could believe that Aldrich could have caught a cloud like her.

But the fact that Volantis bore down on Aldrich meant that he would have been severely disoriented for a few seconds, and that was more than enough time for him to be sent hurtling vastly further than her in this pit of emptiness.

Valera grit her teeth.

But no matter what, Valera would find him. She would find him in this infinity even if it took a thousand years.

Just as she resolved herself to do this, hope flickered in her heart.

She felt a faint connection from Aldrich. It came from the special link they shared as chosen undead and master. One that was magical in nature. She did not know how it happened, how any trace of magic could appear in this empty realm, but the how did not matter so long as she could sense it.

She visualized it as a small thread of white that flowed in front of her, but it did not stretch out long before the darkness ate it up.

It was basically just a compass that gave her Aldrich's general direction. And, as she suspected, he was deeper down.

How far, she did not know. Most likely an unfathomable distance.

Distance, though, did not matter.

Even if there was an infinite separating them, somehow, eventually, she would cross it.

With that resolve in her heart, Valera pushed off the cloud, moving down towards the unfathomable darkness below to save her love.

Chapter 400: {Usurper}

In the Necropolis

"Your Usurper is in quite some trouble, Mel. Is that why you called me here? To save him?" Medula stood before the belltower at the peak of the Necropolis.

There, beneath the pillar of green energy that fueled the entire Necropolis was the Death Lord. Gone were her usual regal robes of silky emerald and lavender. Instead, she sat there completely naked, her icy pale skin outlined in a torrent of falling teal energy.

Patches of emerald scales around her elbows, knees, shoulders, and cheeks as well as her two horns, curved back like scythe blades, seemed to take in the energy, glowing with bright green hue.

She sat cross-legged, hands together and eyes closed as the energy roared and crashed through her. She looked like a monk meditating beneath a waterfall, though instead of rushing water pouring through her head, it was unfathomable quantities of magical energy fueled from harvested souls and misery.

"And you are looking awfully thin," said Medula, eyeing Mel's bared body up and down. Normally, Mel was quite muscular underneath her baggy robes or, in her Shattered Bone stance, juggernaut class armor. In terms of physique, she fell just shy of Rella who looked like she shattered boulders between her thighs daily.

Now, though, Medula noticed, Mel had downsized. Her muscles were not entirely gone, but she only looked athletic, not at all like the proud, skull-splattering warlord she had once been.

"I am trying out a diet," said Mel with a smirk. "Do men not love lithe, slender bodies they can hold better than the hardness of muscles that outshines theirs?"

"Since when have you cared of what men think?" said Medula. She shook her head. "You are losing more and more of yourself. This reliquary of souls, though tremendously efficient - I should know, I designed it myself - is not infinite.

Nothing is.

You and Rella must give pieces of yourselves to keep it fueled. Eventually, there will be nothing left in either of you to kindle this realm."

"We can worry about that much, much later," said Mel. "If the Usurper perishes, then so too does this entire realm." She grimaced. "I cannot sense him any longer, but judging by his last moments, he has not been killed.

Or else this realm would have collapsed entirely.

No, he has been sent away. Far away. To another realm entirely. One far across the Between."

Mel took in a tired breath.

The Between was, as the name suggested, the space between realms and dimensions, with realms being larger than dimensions. Realms and dimensions were generally all self-contained bubbles of existence, but they did have proximity to each other that affected how easy it was to influence each other.

It was easier to think of realms like planets in space and dimensions like moons that orbited them.

The void of space, then, was the Between. The farther away realms were across the Between, the harder it was to make contact with them.

Mel's connection with the Usurper was extremely strong. Any bond that lived and died together - Soulbound Bonds, as they were called in Elduin - were like that. The fact that Mel could barely feel any hint of connection meant that the Usurper was indeed far, far away.

"What is with that look of longing?" said Medula. "You do not truly need him, do you? If he perishes now, then he simply failed your test to inherit your powers. And you are not shy of facing death. No, wait..."

The top of the Necropolis where they stood darkened, the view of the ghostly hills below fading away. It was as if a fog of dark had descended upon them, choking away visibility to its very last breath.

"Do you remember now?" said Mel.

"I do." Medula rubbed her forehead. "Dealing with this...restriction is tiring. Do you truly believe the Usurper can rise to the challenge? To challenge the Game, no, to break it entirely?"

"To be honest, I have no idea," said Mel. "But he is who I was bound to, and he did in fact kill me in the other realm when I failed, so he is not exactly incompetent.

Yet, to challenge the Game is an ordeal many times greater than simply facing me. To even speak about it is a difficult trial in its own right.

Were we ordinary beings, we would have been annihilated for merely even thinking of it. Even now, to even have discourse about it, we must make this awkward arrangement where I can speak only to you, but you are bound to forget everything."

"Ah, so this is why you were so lenient with the Usurper," said Medula. "And why you grant me leave of this realm. Once you are fully Usurped, the Usurper will inherit your knowledge of the Game, bypassing your bind of silence.

Then, he can seek me out. As he holds the essence of your being at that point, I will remember our plan. I will help him begin the Singularity of Undeath. He will challenge the Game.

What a complicated thing this is." Medula tapped her chin "And fraught with difficulties and uncertainties."

"No plan is ever perfect, but regardless, I do hate to see my efforts go wasted," said Mel. "I failed to challenge the Game, and thus, our realm was doomed. But it does not have to be so for the Usurper and his realm.

Or for all others."

"Provided the Usurper escapes this predicament." Medula narrowed her eyes. "As dire as the situation is, I fear you may have lost this bet already, Mel."

"No, not yet," said Mel. "That is why I have called you here. I can still sense the Usurper, however faint. He has been stripped of all mana, hence his imprisonment, but there are ways to fix this.

I myself cannot transfer power to him, far as he is across the Between, but you, Med, with your affinity with spatial magic, can do it. You can establish a link between me and him.

And once he Usurper gets my power, his little one can teleport him from his prison."

"This is nonsensical," said Medula. "The farther away the Usurper is through the Between, the less power we can give him. If he is so far you can barely sense him, we would need an inordinate amount of energy to-,"

"Look where we are, Med," said Mel. She pointed a finger up at the torrent of power coursing through her. "With the power of the Necropolis, it will be enough. If that is not enough, I will break my own essence down into raw mana."

Medula's eyes glowed bright red as she rapidly calculated roughly how much energy it would take. "No, not even close. The Necropolis will not suffice. You must break yourself down. And even with that, at best, across this Between distance, you will give the Usurper the equivalent a little light on a matchstick when he would need a bonfire."

"Sometimes, a little light is all it takes for the determined traveler to find their way," said Mel.

"It is not just that, Mel. If you take this step forward, if you sacrifice this chunk of yourself for the Usurper, you are sealing your fate. You will be too weak to stop him from taking over your being," said Medula.

"That was the plan, was it not?" said Mel.

Medula crossed her arms and gave a pointed stare at Mel. "I bound myself to you as you broke me of eternal servitude to the knowledge god. I always believe in equivalent exchanges. You broke me from unwilling eternal servitude, I grant you my own willing eternal servitude.

But you are making that eternity awfully short.

Will you not consider stopping your fight here? Before you are destroyed and absorbed like some common mana crystal?"

"Do you see me fighting now, bound quietly as I am here? No, it is the Usurper that is fighting. Carving his name into that world of his." Mel smiled. "The rise of a conqueror is always a wonder to behold."

"But he need not conquer you," said Medula. "It is still not too late, Mel. With your help, I can potentially break you free from this System. I can take you far, far away and let you have some peace. Peace you never knew. Peace you dreamed of.

Yes, that thing you are holding back will be set free, and with it, the System will consume the Usurper.

His world will likely fall. The knowledge in it lost.

But you will be safe.

And even if you do succeed, if by giving away all of yourself, the Usurper does earn the right to challenge the Game, how can you be certain he will triumph? Every struggle he has faced so far, even the struggle to conquer his world, it is all trivial in the face of the Game.

How far will he make it? He will face the wrath of both the Outsiders and the Uplifted. He may even risk awakening the Dreamer, and with that, all of existence-," Medula waved her hand dismissively. "Gone.

Tabula Rasa - the fated emptiness of the universe through chaos and entropy that all knowledge demons fear. It will be upon us."

"I know, I know. Every time you remember, we have this discussion," said Mel. She bared a fanged smile at Medula. "But you know what, I like it. It shows that deep down, in that icy heart of yours, you care about me."

"I do. I may not remember these talks, but I do remember our other ones. I know you dreamed of peace. Solace in a quiet end without fighting. I can give that to you." Medula grew quieter. "I want it for you."

"I know. But a peaceful end - it is, like you said, a dream," said Mel. "It is a dream I denied to countless many. I do not regret what I did, and part of that acceptance comes with the understanding that I too shall not go out into the dark of death with closed eyes of content."

Mel stood up, reaching her hand out to Medula. She smiled proudly. "If you care about me, Med, if you truly, truly care, then allow me to face my end with pride.

With the knowledge that my Usurper will take me, my body, my power, my everything, and finish what I set out to do.

For Mellicanthys the Chill Dread never steps back from a battle she began, no matter if she faces death or the cold, cruel, unfathomable forces of the greater universe."